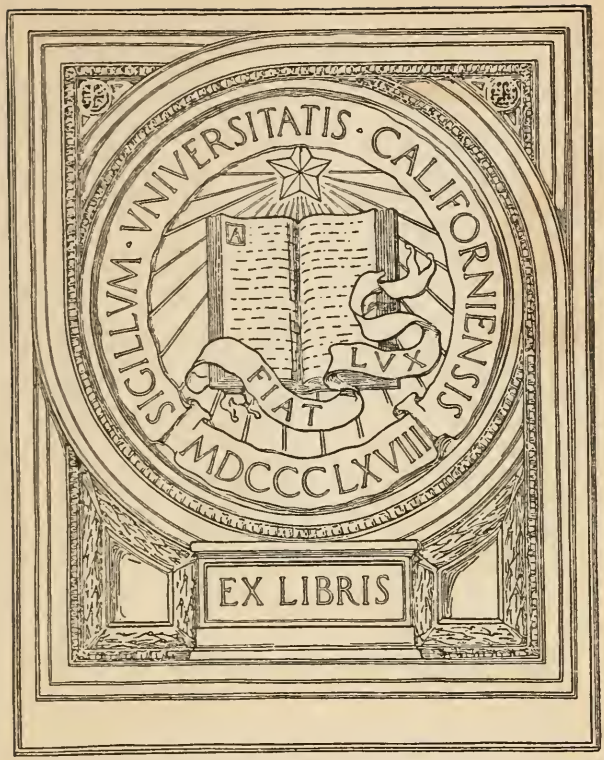
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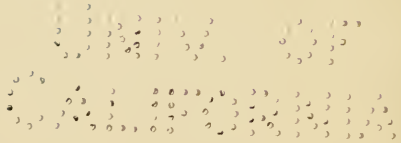

MY SON AND I
BY
MRS: M·H·SPIELMANN
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BY HUGH THOMSON
LONDON
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TO

M. H. S.

IN GRATEFUL AFFECTION

MABEL H. SPIELMANN

845854

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MY SON AND I

CHAPTER I

WE TWO

I WAS alone. My friends and my few relations had gone. They had all exhorted me to continue to be brave for the sake of my son, or for the sake of my health, or for the sake of them—words which I heard, but the meaning of which I somehow couldn't fully grasp. After all the solemn bustle the house now seemed painfully still. I moved toward the blinds to draw them up—the drawing-room had been too oppressively dreary—but I stopped suddenly. The reflection from a mirror quite startled me; a small, slight, mourning-clad figure confronted me, with a face pale in patches, with heavy eyes, and features swollen from many days of crying.

"Can that be I?" I thought. "Oh!" I looked a being so entirely different to my usual self with my customary light dress and

laces and trinkets. I remembered having wondered—as I daresay many young married women have wondered—if I should look nice in widow's weeds. Now, in the grim and terrible reality of sorrow, there was no room for thoughts of vanity, and I turned from my contemplation with a shiver of horror.

"I shall have to bear it all," I said aloud; "I must bear it better than I've done." My own voice was coming back to me as an echo, and a feeling of giddiness made me clutch hold of a chair. It was so oppressive in the room that I pulled up the blinds, and the June sunshine fell comfortingly on my cold hands. On opening one of the French windows I felt a refreshing breeze lift the curls from my hot forehead, and I stepped out on to the balcony. A game of lawn-tennis was being played in the square below, and in a sort of stupor of vagueness I thought how happy *they* were, and, in the main street beyond, how smart the people were in the carriages crowding along together, enjoying all the brightness of the London season. How indifferent they seemed to the suffering and miseries of others—or, at least, how unconscious! I couldn't bear it. An organ close by started playing "Rigoletto"; it jarred on my nerves, and I went indoors.

The sense of my desolation seemed to grow each minute, and I felt so helpless. I missed the accustomed smell of a cigar, which I liked so much, for it meant so much. And upstairs the usual number of sponges and brushes had been removed. I wanted them there—mine looked so solitary; perhaps it would seem childish to ask for them back.

At that moment the door was thrown open and closed again, and in toddled my son in a white frock and black ribbons, his arms extended towards me, and at a run that was more than risky for his unsteady little legs. He crawled on my lap, laughing, to bestow his customary hug; then looking up at me with his dark eyes, he wiped his mouth on his frock and said:

"Poor! All wet tears;" and in the same breath he added, "Ugly dwess, mummy; take it off!" Then he scrambled down and trotted off towards the writing-table in the back room, calling gaily, "Daddy, are you weady? I want you; let's play cushion fight!" Finding the accustomed chair was still empty, he came back to me with a woebegone look. "All gone again!" he cried. "I want him!"

"And I want him too," I said, folding my treasure in my arms, forgetting my good

resolutions, and quite unable to control my grief. But he was anxious for his box of bricks, so it had to be brought out from the cupboard, and we built the craziest house, from an architectural point of view, that could possibly be induced to stand. However, he surveyed it with infinite pleasure, and it was decided then and there that it was "a bootful house," must remain where it was, and be given as a present to Lambert to live in. And as Lambert just then entered to carry off her charge to bed, the presentation was duly made, when her excessive surprise and joy caused the greatest delight; and as she noticed my little smile, her raptures, kind soul, knew no bounds, and she went off with the donor, who was rippling over with as much pride and satisfaction as if he had just run up the Houses of Parliament.

"Don't shut the door; I'm coming too," I called out in sudden dread. "I'll sit with him until he goes to sleep."

I too must have fallen asleep, holding his tiny hand in mine, for it was still there when I was awakened by Lambert saying:

"If you please, mem, Mr. Ryan has called again to inquire how you are this evening, and if there is anything he can do."

"I'll go down, Lambert," I replied, softly kissing the little fingers before I relinquished them, and went to my room to make a hasty toilet. It was kind of our neighbour; I so felt the want of a friend. He evidently didn't expect to see me, for he was examining the binding of a book he had taken up. Mr. Ryan was a thin man of middle height, with a slight stoop. His shaven face and clear-cut features and piercingly bright eyes might have belonged to a lawyer or an actor, were it not for a delicately refined thoughtfulness that seemed to bespeak the man of letters. It was a face that in a crowd would arrest attention; and no matter how familiar it was, there seemed always some new interest in it. He turned towards me, surprised.

"I blame myself," he exclaimed apologetically; "I've disturbed you—you come from upstairs."

I pressed his hand, for I found I was too unnerved to thank him. After a moment I inquired:

"Are your wife and baby getting on well?"

"Yes, thank you, excellently."

"Have you decided on a name yet?"

"How thoughtful you are! Yes; we think 'Dulcie' is pretty. I've been wanting to

know your opinion, as you are so great on pretty names; but of course I didn't mean to trouble you with that." He seemed pleased to pursue the topic, more for the sake of distracting my thoughts, I felt. "What do you think of it?"

"I like it very much."

"That's all right. Now, good-night! No, I won't sit down—unless— No; sleep is the best thing for you; you look worn out."

"Good-night," I said. I remember ringing the bell and hearing the front door slam to, and I remembered no more. I suppose I must have fainted. Many weeks of illness followed, and when I overheard that I was "out of danger" I am ashamed to remember that it was a feeling of regret rather than of gratitude that stole over me.

Dr. Alan Charleston, our old medical adviser, cheered and upheld me throughout; indeed, I really don't know what I should have done without him during those six weeks. I have referred to him as old, partly perhaps because he always referred to himself as an "old bachelor"; but he was probably not more than forty—one of those men who baffle all guessing of their age. I was lying on the drawing-room sofa one afternoon, lazily fanning

myself and feeling very weak, when he paid me one of his visits, which had become less frequent of late.

"And how's the little lady?" he asked cheerily, sitting beside me and from force of habit feeling at my pulse.

"Better, I think, Dr. Charleston, but—but very weary."

"Ah!"—he paused, and there was silence whilst he held his watch—"rather thready! And how's our Scientific Department—eh?"

"It's not fair to chaff me, you know, until I'm stronger and able to turn the tables; but if you are referring to Baby," I said, smiling proudly in spite of myself, "he's quite well, and getting rather wilful."

"Then you must be spoiling him."

"No, indeed——"

"Now, what I've called in to say to-day won't take you by surprise, I think. I've come to advise change of air."

"Oh, I couldn't! I really couldn't look up trains and things. I haven't a notion how to take myself about, let alone manage for a child and nurse."

"But what I advise is, that you and the Scientific Department and Lambert should take a sea voyage, say to Naples and back, and I'll

get your berths and see you off. All you'll have to do is to be turned off the boat when it arrives, and Cook's people will meet you and see to your hotel rooms, and put you all on the next boat home. Do you think you could manage that?" His smooth, mild face, with the thick iron-grey hair framing it, was looking down at me so amused that I faltered, confused:

"You *must* think me foolish."

"What I think is— But tell me, have you had many visitors since I last came?"

"My cousin Barbara Whyte came yesterday afternoon."

"She's always kind. Are your aunts flourishing?"

"Aunt Rose is complaining somewhat."

"Oh, the usual complaint!" he replied, laughing, and he got up and held out his hand. "Well, shall we arrange the trip for the end of next week?"

"Is it quite necessary, do you think, Dr. Charleston? . It's so very far."

"Far? Fiddlestick!"

"But am I not getting well?"

"Quite so. That's exactly the reason. You are now well enough to travel, and you require toning up. And it will do the child a world of

good. Good-bye! You don't want my visits any more. You've nothing to trouble about; I'll just go and talk to Lambert and look up that young rascal."

The day of departure came all too soon, and I was standing on the moving steamer with my boy in my arms blowing kisses to the knot of friends on the quay, whilst the expanse of water between widened and widened, and the hurrahs from land came fainter and fainter till they ceased altogether.

The days passed—sunny, breezy, bright blue days—and then came the longing for England and to see English faces; then on board ship again, with the usual monotony broken by the usual little excitements. And once more we were rattling through our London square, and in restored health and vigour I entered my home again. How the sad memories re-awakened at every glance, at every sight! But I could battle better against them now. And then there were flowers—such lovely flowers about! A basket of carnations, my favourite flower, from my neighbours. A large bunch of homely blooms from Barbara's garden. Roses from Dr. Charleston. That *was* kind. And a long letter of welcome from that best of all possible aunts—Aunt Prue.

I dearly loved my Aunt Prue. How I wished she could come to me now! But she lived with her crabbed sister at Bath, and she never, never would leave Aunt Rose.

After all, I felt glad I had not given up my pretty house with its dear memories, where we had been so happy, as at first I had decided to do, although it certainly was very lonely now, and very quiet with the nursery on the top floor.

I should have liked to invite Barbara to come and stay with me, for she was a great chum of mine ; but then, her brother couldn't spare her. Their straitened circumstances made them live in a small villa at Highgate, where Lawrence was divisional surgeon and general practitioner ; so she could come to me but seldom, as she was the angel of the little house. However, I should be able to go to her often ; the fresher air and her bright company always braced me up.

It was just after my return that I formed a resolution—a big little resolution that afforded me much satisfaction. I made up my mind to try to write a story for children, which perhaps my son one day might read. Mr. Ryan, who was rapidly making a great name in the literary world, had often pressed me on the point ; and

recently, when he urged it and I asked him why I should, he had replied quietly:

"Oh, because—simply because I know you can—because you are not too grown-up—and also, perhaps—forgive me—but that sort of dainty work is not to be produced by too logical and practical a mind."

As his argument, though not altogether flattering—at least not without reservations, it seemed to me—sounded promising for my task, and as I also recognised it would be well to have some absorbing occupation in the evenings, I sat down and evolved a title—and there I stuck. As soon as I put pen to paper my brain became paralysed or hypnotised. The sight of the blank sheet made my mind just as blank. I told Mr. Ryan it was hopeless.

"Write the story to your son in the form of a letter," he advised.

It struck me that I must, after all, be shamefully incapable to have to resort to that. Nevertheless, I took up my pencil, sat down to my blank sheet, felt my paralysis creeping over me, and quickly traced my opening words:—

"My dear Boy,—I write to you in the sincere hope of telling you something amusing.

"Many, many years ago, when the daisies had just been invented, and every one in the world was still fresh and young, there lived a beautiful little Princess. . . ."

When I paused it was only because my pencil wanted re-pointing, and soon I saw to my surprise that I had covered many sheets of notepaper. I glanced at the clock—I had been writing for two hours! So, then, I was able to write — if only on notepaper. My cheeks were burning and my feet were like lumps of ice. But, thought I, how about the quality of the story? I feared to read it over, yet I did it with eager curiosity, and came to the conclusion that I was no judge; so I enclosed it with a few lines of apology to Mr. Ryan, rang the bell, and sent the heavy envelope next door. In half-an-hour it came back, with the marginal note: "By all means go on with the tale, and we'll see to the polishing together."

Thus, steered by the advice and knowledge of my friend, the fairy story was sent to a children's magazine, and for the whole of the following week my heart thumped every time I heard the postman's knock. At last came a business-looking note. It was from the

editor of the magazine, accepting the little story, and offering what I considered princely terms. "Sweet man!" I thought to myself.

"I don't think much of the terms," said Mr. Ryan. "Next time I shall take the MS. myself."

"It is good of you—but unfortunately there's not going to be a 'next time'; the little imagination I possessed is completely used up."

"I'm sure there'll be a 'next time,'" he said quietly. And there was, and many other "next times"; and when I stuck a little flag on my door outside, it meant that I was in fairy-land and must not be disturbed, and nothing less important than a telegram should bring me back.

I was constantly in and out next door seeking literary advice when I knew I should not be disturbing Mr. Ryan at his work. The artistic biography which he was writing interested me, too, and I felt very proud when he began to show me its daily progress, and read me bits, and even consulted me at times. I found that I could be of help, and I eagerly busied myself with what we called "research work" for him; and when he had shown me how to correct my own proofs, I was able to revise his too.

One afternoon when we were at work I remarked wistfully, "I believe you only let me help you because you know how sad my leisure time is."

"No, no!" he rapped out. "It is a great boon to a man to find some one interested in his work. I might as truly say I believe you only help me because you feel you must return a thousand-fold the little I have been able to do for you!"

"Don't be absurd, Mr. Ryan. It is a privilege to me, besides being a lesson in literary style, and the busier I am the happier I am. The difficulty I find," I added, with a smile, "is learning the golden rule of silence, not interrupting or asking anything during secretarial work."

"Yet, with hard training, I suppose even the feminine mind— But your collaboration is too precious for any chaff or criticism whatsoever."

I was using his typewriter to make a fair copy of my new MS. that he had approved, when Mrs. Ryan entered; as usual, with a nice smile for me, but never realising or never troubling whether she was interrupting work or not, she sat down and began to chatter domesticities in no very congenial spirit. Her husband put aside his pen and lighted another cigar; for a cigar at some stage of consumption

seemed part of the man. He was always patient and courteous. She was a restless, sharp-featured woman, with a faded appearance, and hair done too much off her forehead. I didn't care for her; it puzzled me why he ever married her. I did hear a rumour that there was some misunderstanding with her father and he was trapped into it. They had nothing in common. She didn't sympathise with, or even understand, his beautiful books, and she was always dissatisfied with their own social position.

"Can you take me to the theatre to-night, Alex?" she suddenly asked.

"I could to-morrow, but I've undertaken a long article on the new acquisitions at the British Museum; it is overdue, and I must get it finished, take it to the office to-night, and correct the proof there."

"And I have to be sacrificed! And what will you get for it? Four or five guineas! I always say the Stock Exchange would be a far more sensible career, and leave your evenings free. Books are no use, either, for bringing in money in large enough sums.—Now, if that eccentric German cousin of his," she continued, turning to me, "old Josef Blum, would only die and leave us all his money, then I should

say, 'By all means take up literature as a recreation.'"

"My dear, how can you go on talking like that!" exclaimed her husband, trying to hide his vexation. "He is practically a stranger to me, a remote relation. I don't want his money; personally, I am quite satisfied with health and occupation. Our position is without anxiety, and our child is brought up in comfort."

Finding no adequate reply, she said, again turning to me, "Oh, do please stop that machine; it does go so on my nerves! What are you doing with it?"

"Typing my little story," I replied meekly, gathering the sheets together.

"Well, it has seemed to me odd," she retorted curtly, "for you to go in for that sort of thing. Paupers like us are glad, after all, of a guinea or two; but you"—I smiled inwardly at the word "paupers"—"you do it to kill time, I suppose? It seems to me quite peculiar."

"I do it partly for occupation, partly for my son's future amusement."

"Do you give your earnings in charity? You can't want them, can you?"

"I'm afraid they are not very great at present," I answered gaily. I didn't tell her

that I had bought a little handbag for Aunt Prue, and, reluctantly, one for Aunt Rose, who otherwise would have been offended. Nor did I mention that the three first sovereigns were given to my son with the explanation that he was to buy toys for the poor little children who were ill. I remember how joyously he and I went alone to the toy-shop, he having quite grasped the idea. Nevertheless, he looked rather bewildered when the toys he chose were put on one side and he was not allowed to touch them. In fact, he looked more and more woebegone, until at last he blankly refused to surrender a woolly ball with a bell inside that had taken his fancy immensely. I thought of how he wept over it, and how I was getting such a headache that I weakly gave in. I had intended buying him a toy, so from my point of view it was all right ; but he showed such a gleam of triumph at having obtained what he screamed for, that I feared future struggles for supremacy.

"I repeat," said Mrs. Ryan, "you're only taking the bread out of other people's mouths."

I apologised for my inattention. "Then how about the great novelists," I asked, "who made a fortune and still went on writing ? Would you have had them stop ? Our literature would lose."

"No. I'd have them give the money in charity."

"How, then, about other professions? The successful lawyer, the doctor, and others—even your successful stockbroker? Where's your stopping point? People might even say you have quite enough, living in comfort in your artistic home, and that your husband's earnings should go in charity!"

Mrs. Ryan sniffed, and her husband burst out laughing.

"Please forgive my bluntness," I begged, "but I've heard the same view from others, and I have thought it over, and find it socialistic and kind, but too theoretical for practice."

She replied that, never mind, it was a fact, and it did take the bread out of other people's mouths; and there the matter ended, for she changed the subject by adding, "And I understand that you are good enough to help my husband—it's a shame to trouble you. I tell him that by now he ought to afford an experienced paid male secretary." She didn't see his anger rise as he began:

"Never——"

"How's little Dulcie getting on?" I interrupted.

"She is ailing slightly."

"Then call in Dr. Charleston," said Mr. Ryan.

"He's very clever," I urged from my side.

"No," she replied emphatically, "I don't care to employ him. He's one of those fashionable practitioners, and I've made our man understand I don't want him unless I send for him. Come and see her ; this room is too stuffy for any one with all this smoke.—Alex, you'd better open the window wider ; but don't take cold."

I followed her upstairs. The little daughter was a great interest to me, and it was pretty to see her sleeping so sweetly. My son, curiously enough, had taken an instant dislike to the child; as, indeed, he did to anything in human shape younger than himself. I love babies ; I wondered if that was his reason.

"I suppose you are both going to the Royal Academy soirée next week?" I said, when I took my leave.

"*I* shan't go, so Alex says he won't. Artists *will* talk shop," she explained, with a shrug of her shoulders, "especially when they meet him, and I do get so bored."

It was a wonder to me how he could persevere in spite of her constant discouragement and opposition to his advancement. He was already looked upon as a leading authority on many artistic matters, and his fine literary

style was making an excellent impression, as I gathered from the reviews that I cut out and pasted in a book with so much admiration and pride. Of course, he didn't know that.

"Well, good-bye! I won't disturb your husband by fetching my MS. now; I'll come round about it to-night."

"Don't you trouble to do that," she replied; "I'll send the maid with it;" and it was clear that she must have private matters to discuss with Mr. Ryan before he went off to the printing office in the City. So I lost a couple of hours' typewriting, and spent my evening alone, brooding over the past, and longing for those dear arms that would never clasp me again.

CHAPTER II

IN BARBARA'S GARDEN

My son's upbringing gave me serious matter for thought. I conscientiously tried to do my best, but I fear that my best seethed with mistakes. Perhaps I ought to have been more severe, but I couldn't bear to see him unhappy, and he seemed somehow to have realised at the tenderest age that he was master of the house. Some memories of his youth stand out distinctly in my mind; other periods are but hazy recollections. I know we always understood one another thoroughly as only a mother and son can understand one another; for there is an affinity, an undefinable sympathy, in their dual temperaments, as a general rule, that no other two human beings can ever possess.

It was on his third birthday that my son first called me "little mother." Very many years have passed since then, and I have heard him repeat it in many keys—treble, cracked, gruff, and bass. My memory recalling that term of

endearment which sounded so sweet in my ears brings back Charlie too. He had come to constitute, in his small person, the tea-party on that festive occasion. The curly-headed child sat on the other side of me at table, and showed his affection by stroking my black silk dress with buttery fingers, while his eyes danced with friendliness and good humour.

That he should divert my attention at all roused my son's righteous anger. The young host was jealous. He suddenly scrambled off his chair with the agility of a kitten ; with a chubby, revengeful hand he attached himself to the beautiful golden top-knot of his guest, and his whole body quivered with excitement as he tried to walk away with his capture, as a wild man would have done with his quarry. I quickly separated the infant Hercules from his victim, and taking the affrighted child in my arms, I kissed away his tears. Then I soothed the ruffled feelings of both babies, and friendship was restored. But there was no doubt that Charlie's respect for his friend was greatly increased by the incident.

When he was seven years old my son made the discovery that Charlie was eight months younger than himself. On that account solely, and for several years, he considered his old

friend entirely outside the pale of invitations, and unworthy of association with any one eight months his senior—to be spurned incontinently like any outlaw. He was designated "only a kid," and that, seemingly, brooked no argument. I had heard of such phenomena as crazes in youths, so I put this down as one, like childish jealousy, to be grown out of. I was sorry, because Charlie, of all the boys who came to us, was a favourite of mine, a merry little fellow, too young to understand the awful calamity on the railway that had bereft him of both parents when he was an infant. He lived at Richmond with his strict old grandmother, who was not sufficiently grandmotherly to appreciate the significance and the beauty of such an inheritance. Dulcie, also, was a particular favourite of mine—now a pretty, shy little thing of five years old. I frequently wanted to invite her to tea, but my son would cut me short with the utmost contempt. "She's only a girl and a baby! I don't like girls, and I don't want them!"

I intended to fight this, especially as he had never altered his dislike of her since first he saw her as an infant, simply because he would never cultivate her acquaintance.

"Very well," I said at last; "she is a sweet child, and I shall invite her to come and have

tea, not with you, but with me." But when he pleaded, "We're much comfier together, just you and me," I was disarmed, and the matter was again closured. After all, misogyny is surely the exception, and he would grow out of this phase too.

"Antics!" he would shout when he came to me for our evening romp, and rush on to a chair, especially if he thought there was going to be a new "turn." Then he would present an eager face towards me, and chuckle in anticipation. Whenever I did anything to amuse him, it seemed he must always scramble on to the nearest chair first, the better to enjoy the spectacle.

On this occasion I remember that I tried a few steps of a minuet as an introduction, and his verdict was "very pretty." Then I was my son, stooping badly and staring about me and falling over obstacles. This brought down the house, and had to be repeated, until I firmly refused to respond to any further ovation. Indeed, there never lacked a variety of "turns," for I invariably chose this method of bringing his little faults and foibles to his notice. He was not cognisant of the subterfuge of these early lessons, and so he laughed himself out of any number of the usual fidgety or careless habits

A Few Steps of a Minuet

that always keep cropping up, and which childhood has somehow to be rid of.

Now that he was older, I appointed Lambert housemaid, and engaged an afternoon governess. Fräulein Heinrich was a gaunt, pleasant, weak-minded lady, who, unfortunately, could speak English well, as I found out to my cost ; and as my son informed me at regular intervals that he hated German, and couldn't bear the sound of it, and didn't intend to learn it, I understood what I might expect when I saw them start amiably on their walks for fresh air and German conversation. But they were happy ; so I implored, and shut my eyes, and kept on imploring and shutting my eyes, and they didn't talk German. In the end I had to dispense with her services, and appointed as her successor Monsieur Toudouze, a portly young Frenchman. He was somewhat apathetic and far too good-humoured. On the very first day, during a playful skirmish, the study arm-chair was broken, in consequence, I understood, of his having been too suddenly pushed into it. As he knew no English, the new pupil at once constituted himself his instructor, and kept me *au courant* of the progress made. In the process, fortunately, much French was imbibed, and when the following year I found that Monsieur Toudouze

could talk English quite nicely, I engaged no other tutor in want of English instruction, but placed my son as a daily pupil at one of the best London schools.

My time was consequently more free, and hung heavily enough, so I was constantly up at Highgate. Dulcie often lunched with me, and I spent more time in writing and in helping Mr. Ryan. His wife seemed to become daily more and more nervous and irritable, but not with me; and it struck me that she took no pains to control or conceal her ill-humour. She certainly was not an agreeable woman, yet she had her good points, for she was a devoted mother and, in her own peculiar way, a solicitous wife.

One afternoon my son returned from school, full of pride.

"Muz," he said joyfully, "Simpson *will* come to lunch on Saturday. I didn't think he would. It's awfully good of him, you know, because he is eleven four—four months older than I am."

The important guest, whose age was thus measured like a horse's height, duly arrived. He was rather shy about talking before me at luncheon, and I noticed that my son seemed reserved and anxious. I did my best to interest

them both. I was not very successful. My son showed that he disapproved of my talk, and he was materially helped by the stolid indifference of Simpson, Esq. The roast duck and jam-tarts, however, had been greatly appreciated, so turning to our guest, I said:

"My dear, will you take an orange?"

At this apparently harmless question I was puzzled to see the two boys suddenly look at one another, startled, and grin, and then flush up. I flushed also; I don't know why, except that I was getting nervous and ill at ease. Perhaps I had not quite got over a blunder I made the previous winter when one of my son's friends was leaving after spending a Sunday with us. He wore an Eton suit and a red nose, and he sneezed continually. "I don't see your overcoat and muffler," I had remarked. Whereupon confusion ensued; and it took me a little time to grasp that it was an age when prudence was unfashionable, and that it was offensive in me to suppose it otherwise, or to imagine that boys were human—and I should have known that overcoats and mufflers were considered "unmanly." After Mr. big Simpson had also enjoyed a good tea, he expressed his thanks with some condescension, his shoulders well hunched up to bear the weight of his importance. No

sooner had he gone than my son took me seriously to task.

"Mother, how could you?"

"How could I what?" I inquired innocently.

"How could you talk to Simpson as though he were a baby? Fellows don't like being called 'my dear.' And please remember never to call me anything but my surname when any of the fellows are present. They don't know my first name. And it isn't usual, you know. And it does sound so stupid."

This came as a revelation. My son's name is such a pretty one; but I was evidently in the wrong, and in consequence I was conscious of a breach of etiquette. I also felt that a novel sort of education was about to begin for me; and I hoped that we should soon outgrow this uncomfortable sense of awe before a four-months' seniority. Otherwise, the neglect of the child of the golden top-knot appeared more irrevocable than ever.

That summer a cordial invitation came from Aunt Prue for both of us to spend our holiday as her guests in Bath; and Barbara was to be Aunt Rose's guest at the same time, which she knew would please me. We hadn't met for many years—not, in fact, since my trouble. Aunt Prue couldn't leave her sister. I couldn't leave

my boy. Aunt Rose loathed boys, but as we should only meet all together at dinner and he was too young for late dinner, he would not inconvenience her, inasmuch as she always kept to her own quarters. The real solution of the difficulty lay in the fact that, as she would have Barbara's company, she would not feel neglected or lonely when her sister was with us. Aunt Prue had always wanted Aunt Rose to think more of Barbara, but she always seemed to think rather of herself, and of no one else if she could help it. Evidently she had allowed herself to be persuaded.

We both hailed the treat joyfully. My son had often heard me speak so much of Aunt Prue and the old house at Bath with its delightful surroundings. The next morning I had a note from Barbara telling me she had heard of the holiday plan, was longing to talk it over, and expected me to tea. That afternoon I went up to Highgate, and found my cousin sitting under the beech-tree in her small garden, and, as usual at that hour, knitting a gigantic stocking for her tall brother. Her homely face brightened as she rose and came towards me. Her whole appearance was homely, though touched with little points of coquetry, such as the jet combs in her black hair, and the latest

cut of her dainty collar and cuffs, and trim waistbelt.

"We've lots to talk about to-day," she said, kissing me. "But how sweet you look in mauve! It *is* a nice surprise! We all thought after all this time that you were never going to wear anything but— I wonder," she broke off, "how many new dresses you've had this year."

I laughed guiltily, and pirouetted round. "Like the back of it?"

"Most elegant!"

"It's the boy's doing. He begged me to get 'a flummery dress with colour'; he has said so often that he can't bear black that I've given in at last. I never intended to, but he has been so persistent. It doesn't seem quite right, you know."

"I'm sure it is quite right. No doubt about it."

Barbara's voice had a curious monotony; it was soothing, nevertheless, and quaintly pleasing in its genuine expressiveness.

"We'll have tea at once, so as to be more comfortable. I'll fetch Aunt Rose's letter, if you'll excuse me one moment. Sit down, Dearie."

My old name, Dearie, was always pleasant

to hear. It was only my own family circle who called me that—and *he* always used to call me by it. Aunt Prue started it first when I was little, and then I called myself by it when I first began to talk, and then it remained as a pet name for always.

It was very nice sitting with Barbara under the close red leaves discussing the enjoyable time we should all spend together. I had read to her Aunt Prue's letter, and she now took her own invitation from its envelope.

"It's not such a genial one as yours," she said; "but, of course, Aunt Rose is so altogether different"—and we both smiled. "Listen!

"'DEAR BARBARA,—Your aunt Prudence is inviting Dearie and her boy to spend August here, and it would afford me much satisfaction if you could accompany them and be my guest. I understand that she wouldn't come without the boy. Kindly impress upon her that my nerves are just now peculiarly sensitive to noise; the twittering of birds at dawn, or any tramping up and down the stairs, brings on nervous headache and consequent exhaustion. I thought you might like to take the opportunity of travelling in company, and being with me when Prudence is otherwise

engaged. It is ages since you have honoured us here. I beg you will convey to your brother my kindest remembrance.—Yours affectionately, AUNT ROSE.

"'*P.S.*—Would you please select and bring with you, if you come, 2 lbs. of the best salmon from that shop in Regent Street—I forget the name; we can't get anything like it here. If you can't come, please call there and have it forwarded to me with the account.'"

"I'll do the commission for you, Barbara; it's a journey in itself from here to Regent Street, and out of our way to the station, and I have other commissions to do for her."

"I can't go with you at the beginning of August."

"What!" I cried. "That is too bad. Why didn't you say it at once? Aunt Rose won't like that." My cousin looked confused, and didn't reply. "Is it indiscreet to ask why?"

"It is only that Lawrence has a few medical friends coming informally to dinner on the seventh, and I must be here to arrange it for them—doctors think such a lot of their food, you know."

"Barbara, my dear, if you remain for that, Aunt Rose is sure to be curious, and won't

hesitate to ask me the question she always asks you; and what shall I tell her? Because—because I have my doubts."

"What question?"

"'Is Barbara going to be married?' Perhaps, Barbara, there is going to be something happening in August," I said, "and that you intend to oblige her." I was sorry as soon as the words had escaped me, for her face flushed painfully and she turned away her head. I put my arm in hers.

"Every one can't be happy," she murmured.

"*I* know that, dear, and Aunt Rose knows it too, by her own experience; and I often wonder," I added dismally, "if it is better to have ever known what happiness means." This led to an argument, and then we had to console one another, and when I took my leave we were both as serene as ever, at any rate outwardly.

That evening was a dreadful one. I went round next door to help Mr. Ryan with the index of his new book. Mrs. Ryan was in a particularly peevish humour. She came in, after we had started work, with a small parcel that had arrived for him, sat herself down, and as usual started bemoaning things, railed at her fate, poured voluble scorn on literature as a profession, and had arrived at lamenting lost

opportunities in the direction of the Stock Exchange, when her husband smilingly placed an open jewellery case in her lap. She stopped in astonishment. "Alex, what have you been doing? Good gracious, diamond earrings! I — I certainly did want diamond earrings." The usual pallor was leaving her face, and her voice increased in strength. "But *these!* You don't expect me to wear *these*, do you? These diamonds are *not nearly fine enough!* Of course—you—couldn't *afford it!*" And in a fury of passion she flung them away on the floor, and burst out of the room.

The silence that reigned whilst Mr. Ryan quietly picked up the jewels and restored them to their case was at last broken by his saying sadly:

"It was an inopportune moment, evidently; and I didn't know she had set her heart on larger stones. These are of finer quality and less showy than others the jeweller had." I was too scared to venture on a reply, and was glad that Dulcie entered and made us settle at the table to play a game of dominoes with her. Mr. Ryan sat smoking and gazing at his dominoes in a vacant sort of way, and Dulcie was laughing because I was losing. It was not that my concentration was at fault; I was

thinking of the painful exhibition of fury we had just witnessed. And yet, it seemed to me, how infinitely more painful it must be for the person who was the victim of it and of the impotence to control it, let alone the physical nervous suffering and ensuing loss of self-respect. These reflections were passing through my mind when the servant broke in with an urgent summons to come upstairs to her mistress, who was ill. We hurried to her room, and there found Mrs. Ryan in a fit ; and before the doctor could arrive—she was dead. The terrible suddenness and the awful circumstances seemed to petrify us.

During the first sad days that followed I did all I could to help—to arrange for the household and take care of Dulcie. It was extraordinary how thoughtful the child was for her nine years, so pathetically anxious for her father, who was quite prostrated. Dr. Charleston advised his usual panacea for sorrow—change of scene—and as soon as possible the father and daughter left together on an absence of several months.

On the 1st of August my son and I were whirling along in the train to Bath, enjoying the sight of the golden fields and ever-changing landscape as we flew past them in the express.

Looking out of the window, however, didn't amuse him for long, and he soon took advantage of our being alone to kneel on the seat and execute a legless dance in that position, after which he sprang to his feet and danced a bit of a reel on every seat except mine. After all, if one lets a young colt out into the fresh air he cannot be expected to keep sedately quiet until a preliminary canter has got his spirits out. I warned him of the cost of re-covering the cushions and paying damages to the company; and partly by way of showing how much he was impressed, and partly because I couldn't help laughing, he repeated his performance, and was trying to persuade me to get up and join him in the step of the Highland Fling, when an official made a timely appearance and delighted him by gravely asking him, and not me, for our tickets.

As soon as the train had come to a halt at our destination—

"Here, let me do it, Muz," he exclaimed, jumping out; "you're so helpless.—Hi, porter!" I let him manage, really because I wanted him to learn to be manly and self-reliant. "And you stay there; I'll go and show him the luggage." So I let him do that too; but I counted our baggage at every possible opportunity, and

when he forgot the tea-basket, his book, and my bonnet-box, I surreptitiously pointed them out to the porter, and so saved my young pioneer any mortification.

In the old-fashioned carriage which had been sent to meet us—it had been called a "coach" in its youth—I warned my son earnestly not to do anything to upset Aunt Rose, who was so easily upsetable, and I was still anxiously harping on the same theme when we drew up at the dark, flat-fronted house, which looked to me just the same as ever. I remembered so well the forbiddingly gloomy appearance of the ground floor, and the whole imposing-looking building would have had its old-fashioned mournfulness about it had it not been for the delightfully joyous air of the first floor. That first floor put an altogether brighter complexion on the whole establishment. It was Aunt Prue's domain, and the windows were rich in flower-boxes with gorgeous nasturtiums trailing over them; and a large gilt birdcage was just perceptible hanging as of yore between the maroon curtains in one window and a hanging basket of ferns to balance it in the other. And there was dear Aunt Prue herself, all smiles, standing in the hall to welcome us.

CHAPTER III

AUNT PRUE AND AUNT ROSE

THERE was no woman on earth I loved more dearly than Aunt Prue. She lived with her sister, Aunt Rose, her junior by five years, in a fine house in the best part of Bath—two maiden ladies as unlike in appearance and disposition as two sisters could be—and without other relations than Barbara, her brother, and myself, who all lived in London.

Aunt Prue was of ample and dignified figure, but not too ample to hide a waist that still had shapeliness. Dressed in black, with her kind face and prematurely white wavy hair peeping from the front of her mauve-ribboned cap, she looked like a dear fairy grandmother, and strangers were surprised to hear her called *Miss* Whyte, or "our Miss Whyte," as she was frequently styled by her poor protégés. Indeed, it was a mystery to all how this amiable, lovable woman had ever remained Miss Whyte.

Capricious and spoilt, Aunt Rose had been

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the beauty of the family. She was slight in stature, and wore side curls, which she would shake at times to the accompaniment of a little affected laugh. She also wore a *soupçon* of rouge, and didn't like kissing. She worried around in the daytime, and in the evening arrayed herself in coloured satin and fringe—always fringe—and revelled in recording coincidences or in playing a game of cribbage, while Aunt Prue was her devoted slave, and was not allowed to forget it.

"Poor Aunt Rose!" her sister used to exclaim to me in a hushed, confidential way. "She has had such trials! However—" "However," accompanied with a shake of the head, would come in a cheerful, comforting tone, implying, "It's no use, after all, to dwell on what cannot be mended, and Heaven knows best what is good for us." And then she would turn to some bright topic of conversation—not clever, for she was not what you would call a clever woman; but she knew what humour was, and no one ever felt bored in her cheery company.

The "trials" of Aunt Rose were no secret. Whenever—which was often—she indulged in tantrums, they generally began, culminated, and ended with lamentations on her "trials."

In a remote past she had bestowed her affections, against all advice, upon a cavalry officer, had paid his debts, and almost took a pride in his escapades. But her cavalier at last escapaded away altogether, without a word of apology or of gratitude.

In my youth, I remember, Christmas used always to be kept up in fine style at that old house in Bath, presided over by Aunt Prue, who, with homely hospitality, insisted that there was plenty of room for us all as long as we liked to enjoy the delights of the old-world place.

At those times Aunt Rose developed nerves, and was unable to bear a sound ; so she kept much to her own suite of rooms on the ground floor, tended by that special month's new maid. Shut up with her, too, was her little King Charles spaniel, whose face was lined with aristocratic crossness not unlike that of his mistress, aggravated by a surfeit of sugar and rich food.

"I'm *so* glad you've been able to come!" exclaimed Aunt Prue once more ; and I was again folded in her warm embrace, where I found that sense of love and peacefulness to which I had looked forward so eagerly. Then she said such nice, tactful things to my son

which made him feel at home at once, and what she whispered in my ear about him when he wasn't looking made me flush with pride. After she had inquired anxiously if I had executed all Aunt Rose's commissions which in her letter she had begged me to bring, she counted the parcels over carefully, and finding them right, she smiled once more and marched us in triumph into the boudoir. The royal spaniel growled and snapped at my son's legs as Aunt Rose greeted us. This little idol of Aunt Rose's was even more overfed than his predecessor, and bore an ugly family likeness to the old pet, who had been gathered full of ills to his absurd forefathers.

"How de do?" she said, without enthusiasm. "As soon as I heard the bell I felt sure it must be you, although I am expecting the post. There's his knock! Curious! Intuition or something!"

She examined the parcels critically, and turning over a piece of embroidery I had worked for her, pronounced a staid little sentence, supposed to indicate gratification. A grateful look came my way from Aunt Prue.

"Have you been working anything else?" she asked quickly.

I had done the same, Aunt Prue hastened to

say—*exactly* the same—for her. I knew from experience my little offerings must be identical to please both. Aunt Rose was so quick to feel slighted ; and Aunt Prue—well, I needn't explain.

When these first greetings were over, my son, who had stood unnoticed, was introduced.

"How de do?" said Aunt Rose. "I am glad to see you." She certainly didn't look it, nor was her voice convincing.

"Thank you—I am glad to come," replied my son ; "and I'm very glad we've arrived all right—mother was a great responsibility."

Aunt Rose opened her eyes at him, and then burst out laughing. He grew hot and uncomfortable, and seemed snubbed, and I felt troubled, for it suddenly struck me that his upbringing must be at fault, and that I had thrust him forward too soon. I almost admitted it to myself. Aunt Prue promptly came to the rescue with a "little surprise she had in store for him"—a silver watch, his first, and it nearly took his breath away with pleasure. Nevertheless, when he went to bed he kept me by him to impress upon me that he hoped that something horrid might happen to Aunt Rose. I told him I was shocked, but I fancy he saw me smile.

He made me late, and I came in to dinner five minutes after the gong had sounded. Aunt Prue was seated before the old Crown Derby soup-tureen, looking perturbed, and Aunt Rose sat opposite, silently indignant at being kept waiting. "I'm so sorry!" I said, as I hurriedly took my place; "I was with my son." There was an ominous silence. Aunt Prue evidently feared whatever she said might cause displeasure, and feeling that a glare from Aunt Rose was imminent (Aunt Rose's glare was a thing to be remembered and avoided), she turned attention to herself.

"Rosie, *I* made those balls in the soup. You always like them best, my dear."

"More's the pity, Prudence. They are sure to be *cold* now. In fact, I can't fancy anything now—my appetite's gone off."

"I *am* so sorry, Aunt Rose," I said. The conviction that was in my voice seemed to give Aunt Rose some slight gratification. She knew I was justly uncomfortable.

The cover was removed, and I was relieved to see a cloud of steam go up as the venerable butler handed round the soup.

"Yes, icy cold!" remarked Aunt Rose, with an affected shiver, as she burnt her tongue.

When we all adjourned to the boudoir, Aunt

Rose settled herself comfortably, and she and I began a "cribbage fight," while Aunt Prue quietly knitted in a corner, pleasure floating over her face. Those games were simply a martyrdom to me.

Aunt Rose never played for "love," and was furious if she lost; there was not much fear of that with me. I was no more of a card-player than Aunt Prue, and Aunt Rose would keep on reminding me of the fact while she annotated her score—much like this:

"And one for his nob. You haven't the bump for cards! Your thoughts are wandering. Lay out for crib. Dear me! How little you understand the game—not a glimmer!"

She continued her amusing, but nevertheless rather galling, remarks at frequent intervals, until I could scarcely help relieving my pent-up feelings with a shriek. Her winnings were always piously bestowed on a crossing-sweeper, who styled her "my lady" before her face and "the queer old gal" behind her back. So I felt I was helping to support the poor of Bath —the only interest she had left me in the game.

Just then mulled wine and biscuits were brought in. The brief respite was seized upon by Aunt Prue to say:

"Ah, my dear, how I wish you could live

with us, instead of being so lonely!" Whereupon Aunt Rose frowned at her, thinking I didn't see her; then turning her head, she exclaimed, "Curious! I was just thinking that moment it's a good thing you *don't* live here. Why, you'd be bored to death! And what would you do with that boy?"

I assured them I was not at all lonely, but my voice was unsteady. That night I pegged wrong twice, and Aunt Rose informed me I must do it on purpose. I glanced at Aunt Prue, knitting for "the most deserving case I ever knew." She sent me her old look of comic pity, with lips compressed and eyebrows raised in surprise. Once, and once only, in the old days she had made excuses for me, whereupon Aunt Rose, offended at the "unwarrantable interference in the game," had flounced off to bed.

We really saw very little of Aunt Rose, as I had hoped and expected. Aunt Prue's thoughts were ever for our comfort and amusement, and the days were passing all too quickly. It was a quiet, delightful time, and callers were fortunately scarce; only Mr. Harkspur, the new lawyer, whose genius Aunt Rose claimed to have discovered, and his confidential clerk came constantly, whereat I wondered until Aunt Prue

explained: "It is about some transfer of stock or something. Rosie sees to all that, for that sort of thing is quite beyond me, Dearie. She actually revels in it, and he's so clever, she says, and does so well for us."

The morning before Barbara was expected, Aunt Rose begged I would step down to her boudoir for a long chat. My son grumbled, for we intended going for a walk together, and he would be obliged to go alone.

"Sit down, please," said Aunt Rose. "Now I am going to tell you a secret—Prudence has no head for such matters, but I understand you have some experience which might be of use." I wondered what could be coming. "My dear, I have just finished writing a story for children."

"A story for children!" I repeated, with unnecessary surprise and amusement, I fear. But it was so comic, for Aunt Rose had no shred of sympathy with anything in the shape of a child.

"Yes. The handbags you earned for us fired me to it; and I wanted you to come to Bath so that I might get to know more of the ins and outs of these matters—and besides—of course—I hadn't seen you for so long."

I inclined my head in sober appreciation of

the sentiment. "Who's going to publish it?" I inquired, without any evident sarcasm.

"I haven't decided yet; I thought you might know what method of publication would be best, from the point of view of the largest circulation. The title bothered me, but I got a good one at last. I call it 'The Wisdom of the Waiting Owl, by Rosie Whyte'; or I may take the pseudonym of 'Horatio Marchmont.' I'm not sure. Do you advise a pseudonym in my case?"

"I should hardly think it necessary; but you could decide that later."

"The plot is about an Owl, a Fairy Godmother, and a Wizard," she continued, with a flush of excitement under her rouge, "who live together in a flat."

"In a what?" I interrupted.

"In a flat," she repeated.

By the time she came to the end I had taken out my pocket-handkerchief and was coughing uncomfortably—in fact, I was choking. "Excuse me—a moment," I gasped, pointed to my throat, and with my eyes watering, and feeling as though every vein in my body was bursting, I fled to my room, where I buried my head in the pillow and laughed till my sides ached. After a struggle I recovered my equanimity.

I returned to Aunt Rose, apologised for the "sudden spasm," and told her the address of a typewriter as a preliminary to sending round to the publishers, perhaps through a literary agent. She was making a note of it when in burst my boy, to my consternation, with his cap on.

"I say, Aunt Rose," he cried, out of breath, "I thought you'd like to know at once. I've seen Mr. Harkspur with his man in the Pump Room Gardens—they didn't see me. I heard him say you are going to lose all your money! He did, *really*, mother! He said like this: 'I shall hoodwink the two old ladies as long as I can, and then we'll have to cut for it.' So I thought Aunt Rose ought to know."

I fancied I saw a twinkle in my son's eyes. I was horrified. My aunt had turned pale. "Dearie," she exclaimed, glaring, yet speaking not without dignity, "if this is a joke, I shall never forgive your bringing that boy here. I shall make inquiry." I led him away with dreadful doubts in my mind, and a feeling that I should never be forgiven, and might even be forbidden the house; for the boy, who was certainly mischievous at times, heartily disliked the old lady, as she could hardly help seeing.

In a few days Aunt Rose informed me that

she had gone still more deeply into the securities question, that she found Mr. Harkspur's answers unsatisfactory ; and later, that having become thoroughly uneasy, she was going to make other arrangements, and was advising her sister to do the same. I was glad to see that my son had consequently gone up in her estimation, and that she now regarded him with a certain respect ; but he liked her none the more for that, and confided to me that it would be quite nice if she did lose all her money, if only Aunt Prue could get it.

Regarding money matters, it was Aunt Rose who enlightened me about my own affairs. It was one evening after dinner in her boudoir, just before cribbage time, that she remarked :

"I suppose, Dearie, that *your* monetary affairs are thoroughly well looked after, and you know all the ins and outs of them ?" She had evidently been thinking over the matter, she was so deliberate.

"I fear I don't understand much about them," I admitted. "My poor husband always said there was nothing to do but get the dividends, so far as my father's money is concerned, and those our old lawyer has always seen to."

"Dear me, child ! But about the future—

about your boy! Don't you know the terms of my brother's will?"

"I know that my inheritance from my father is all tied up for my life-time and then goes to my son."

"Only if he lives to be twenty-one," corrected Aunt Rose.

This was new to me. I glanced at Aunt Prue.

"Rosie," pleaded the latter in embarrassed tones, "there's surely no need—for her to——"

"Of course she ought to know, Prudence. You always think money matters of no account, but she has had no one to tell her, seemingly, and as the business head of the family I must do my duty. If, on the death of your husband, you had had no son, Dearie, or now, if your son doesn't attain the age of twenty-one, half the fortune your father left you goes to his two sisters—myself and Prudence."

She delivered all this with such unction that I was quite taken aback; the matter, too, had been so crudely put before me, and the mere notion of being bereft of my boy struck at my heart; but I merely replied, "Let us hope, Aunt Rose, that my son will live at least until he attains the age of twenty-one." She moved to the card-table without making any reply,

when, I fear, I took pleasure in asking to be excused on the plea of headache. I begged Aunt Prue to come with me to my room, and Aunt Rose spent the lonely evening she hated.

Barbara's arrival was the next event.

"How de do, Barbara?" said Aunt Rose. "Dear me! you don't grow younger. Now they can call us 'the *three* old maids of Bath,' for Dearie says you've still no news for us." Barbara smilingly shook her head, and Aunt Prue's beams of welcome made up for much.

It was on the following evening, after I was in bed, a tap came at the door, and my cousin sought admittance.

"Come in," I said; "I'm only looking at *Punch*."

"I thought you might be reading; I saw the light under your door, Dearie. I want an opportunity for a chat alone." She was in her dressing-gown; she took my volume away, begged permission to put the lights out as she "could talk to me better so," lighted the night-light, and seated herself in the arm-chair by my side.

"I am all attention, Barbara. No trouble, I hope?"

"Something very confidential," she answered softly. "I've been having a long talk with

Aunt Prue late this afternoon in her parlour whilst you were all out." The weather was unusually cold for the time of year, and I knew well that cosy combination of tea, twilight, and bright fire which was always lighted on the very slightest provocation in that sanctum which Aunt Rose never entered. The red carpet and draperies, she declared, were hideous and made her eyes ache; but Aunt Prue clung to everything in that room, and would have nothing altered in it, for it was just as their mother left it. I could imagine the two chatting in the gathering darkness, with the kettle singing drowsily on the hob, as it would for hours together, out of sheer good fellowship. I could see the thumbs of Aunt Prue's clasped hands twirling away slowly, a habit which irritated Aunt Rose beyond endurance, but which she couldn't break herself off. How often had I myself enjoyed such confidential moments and been soothed and cheered by them! I remembered that once——

"Dearie! I'm waiting for you to open your eyes—I can see you, you know."

"O Barbara! that old habit of mine—I was picturing you both together—indeed, I'm all attention."

"Well then, as I want you to know it all,

and as I want you to know how kind Aunt Prue was, this is what happened. I had invited myself, you must know, so when we had finished tea Aunt Prue began twirling her thumbs, and though she expressed no curiosity, she smiled encouragingly at me, for I felt awkward and she noticed it.

"'Aunt,' I murmured, 'I really have a confession to make;' and my cheeks glowed so, I was glad the firelight could reveal so little.

"'Ah, at last!' sighed Aunt Prue—such a sigh of relief it sounded—'in love at last—really? Quick, my dear, tell me. Who is it?'

"I knelt and folded my arms round her as I half whispered, 'Don't be surprised. He's heaps older than I am—quite heaps and heaps. It's your friend, Dr. Alan Charleston.' I felt her tremble. Then, hearing no reply—

"'Aren't you pleased, aunt?' I asked.

"She stooped and kissed me—once, twice, oh, many times—before she spoke.

"'Does he—does he care for you?' she asked at last. Her face was in shadow, so that I couldn't read it. She was evidently labouring under emotion, for her voice was unsteady. I was rather surprised, for I never knew she was so anxious about me, or could

be so sympathetic—*you* have always been her favourite niece, and always will be.

"'That's the trouble,' I replied; 'I don't know if he does.' Then I became excited and voluble, and I burst out with, 'I do love him so—you can't think! Our acquaintance has been comparatively short—but—I wanted so much to tell you—but—O aunt, somehow I think you can't understand what I feel.'"

"What did she reply to that, Barbara?" I asked earnestly.

"She replied gently, 'I think I can.' Then she rose and opened the window slightly. I, too, thought the room was getting close. Just then Myles brought in her reading-lamp and drew the curtains. When we were alone once more Aunt Prue said, 'Dr. Charleston is the best of men. Surely I ought to know. I have known him since his childhood. I believe you would be very happy—and,' she added, smiling, 'I admire your taste.'"

"Oh! Aunt Prue took it like that, did she?" I muttered, pondering.

"Dearie, you *are* exasperating to-night." Barbara was really hurt as she added, "The point is what you think about it, not how Aunt Prue took it. Aunt Prue said at the end, 'Tell it all to Dearie; she knows him,

too, very well; and she sees him often, and she may perhaps know more than I, and be of help.' O Dearie, he can't care for me, can he?" and she burst into tears. "I'm so unhappy!" she sobbed. "If only I knew one way or the other!"

"My poor Barbara! I thought it was some one else you cared for. I fear he is a confirmed bachelor—at least he always says so, and a man of that age often means what he says."

"Do you think he has ever cared for anybody?" asked Barbara tearfully.

"Well, Dr. Charleston was a great friend of my poor husband, who told me that before our marriage he had noticed that a young girl seemed to be in love with his friend. My husband had introduced him to her mother's house in Mayfair. But he soon found that the mother was against the visits of the handsome young doctor, who had no private means, as she had a rich cousin in view for marriage with her only child. Dr. Charleston was offended, and discontinued his visits to Mayfair. The girl was very unhappy, and after the lapse of some months she wrote to him, reminding him he had not called to see them since the New Year, and alluding to the

pleasure some flowers of his had given her. He showed this letter to my husband dejectedly, and wrote a few distantly polite lines in reply. Then—there's no harm in telling you, it's so long ago—she married her cousin, who was longing for her. Since then Dr. Charleston has advanced step by step to the head of his profession, through making tubercular disease his speciality, and has excelled in his ambition. I should dearly like to see you happy, Barbara, and you would be, married to him. Leave it to me—he won't be offended with me. I shall try and find out. So pull yourself together—it's not like you to give way;" and I drew her down on my pillow.

"Who was the lady?" asked Barbara, after a time, looking up. "Do you know?"

"Her name was Marcella Ellismere."

"What has become of her?"

"I don't know."

It was so late when Barbara left me that my night-light was spluttering in the dawn.

CHAPTER IV

A CONFIRMED OLD BACHELOR

ONE of the first things I did after returning home was to imagine a bad headache and send for Dr. Charleston.

"Well, little lady? Are we in pain to-day?" he asked on entering.

"Not much."

"Why, you're *looking* very well. You could hardly look better if you were shamming."

"O Doctor!" I exclaimed reproachfully.

"Well, well!"

"I want cheering up, I think; but sometimes my head really seems to take leave of its senses."

"When you are writing?"

"I won't be chaffed."

"Now look here, my dear lady; it's all very well to want cheering up, but you must remember I am a very busy man, that the afternoon has a habit of slipping away, and——"

"But my head——"

"My advice is, put on your hat. I'm going Highgate way, and I'll drop you at your cousin's, and *she'll* cheer you up."

"But she's away still, at Bath. Lawrence has spared her for another week—I suppose to play cribbage with her hostess. Aunt Rose must have been losing, and wants to recover her luck."

"Don't be malicious, but come for the drive," he said, laughing. "You can wait in the brougham whilst I pay just the one visit, and I'll bring you home again. It's that boy being at school makes you more lonely and nervous."

I readily complied.

It was only on our return that I got him to talk about his patients, and learnt that the crowd of recent ones were all consumptives. Then I got him to talk of his youth, and how he aspired to become a specialist in that branch of the profession.

"It is a fine thing," I remarked, "to achieve such special knowledge and be able to do so much good."

"I suppose so. To give people back their health is an immense self-gratification in this grey world—when one can do it," he replied.

"Grey world, Doctor?" I ventured at last, but very nervously. "Don't you find it grey through living in that big house in Harley Street all alone?"

"I'm too busy an old bachelor to be lonely."

"I wonder you have never married," I persisted.

There was a pause. His eyes were fixed on me, surprised; his mind seemed to be working. I pretended to look out of the window dreamily, but feared I had committed an indiscretion and felt uncomfortable. Soon he took my hand in his and said gently:

"I thought there was only one saint on earth, and that was your aunt Prue. She is older than I, and seemed to consider herself older still, or during my young days I might have enrolled myself one of her numerous suitors of that time. It has always puzzled me why *she* never married. Her one idea appeared to be that her sister should marry. Whenever we talked in a confidential humour she was sure to turn the conversation on to Rose, who had been so cruelly forsaken, and whose alleged virtues ought to be appreciated. But there was no admiring her sister Rose."

At this I laughed; it really seemed too

ridiculous to think of Aunt Rose married to Dr. Alan Charleston. But with this confirmation of the light that had dawned upon me after what Barbara told me of her confidential interview, it was no longer a puzzle to me why unselfish Aunt Prue had preferred the martyrdom that was the portion of "our Miss Whyte."

"And all this time, no one else?" I persisted, though falteringly, in my staunchness to Barbara.

Again there was an uncomfortable pause; then he dropped my hand, and said in a voice that was quite clear, "She's married—I've not seen her for years—we won't talk of her. And," he added more gaily, "it seems that instead of the old bachelor cheering the little lady, it is she who is bent on depressing the old bachelor—the absolutely confirmed old bachelor."

"When a bachelor insists he is 'confirmed,'" I replied, "it's the last signal he holds out before he flies the white flag."

"Indeed!" he replied; "you'll be writing novels next. 'Confirmed' with me, however, means—confirmed."

He laughed. I accomplished a faint smile, and was forced to relinquish the matter as hopeless.

A Confirmed Old Bachelor

As soon as I had taken off my outdoor things I sat down and wrote a few lines to Aunt Prue, informing her that I had just gathered from Dr. Charleston's own lips that he was "an absolutely confirmed old bachelor," and that I knew no one could comfort Barbara as she could.

That night when I had composed myself for sleep an awful thought suddenly flashed itself into my mind and made my cheeks burn madly. "Could Dr. Charleston possibly have imagined that—when I asked him why he didn't marry—that he could have thought—that I could possibly have meant— Oh, surely not! Oh no, *no!* Surely he must know me too well for that!" Nevertheless, I buried my head in the bedclothes with the conviction that I could never get to know what he did think, and vowed aloud in muffled tones: "I'll never do a kind action of that kind again. It's too ridiculous and humiliating. No, *never* again, not for any one!"

Six months later trouble befell Aunt Prue. Aunt Rose wrote shortly that she had always had "a feeling" that Mr. Harkspur was a fool, if not worse, and had accordingly taken her affairs out of his hands some time back, and had advised her sister to do the same—(I

wondered why she hadn't the generosity to put it down to my son's timely warning ; perhaps she forgot, as she often did when her natural conceit would unconsciously assert itself)—but that Aunt Prudence had belied her name, entertaining a sentimental preference for believing in the absconding knave for lack of any absolute proof, and had been justly punished, for through him all her property had disappeared to the last farthing! I was horrified at the news. Poor Aunt Prue ruined!

A pathetic letter followed from Aunt Prue, telling how her sister had scolded so that she had quite upset herself, and how, unfortunately, she was going to be a burden on dear Rosie for the rest of her days. (Ah, thought I, I know what that means—hourly sacrifice and daily pin-pricks.)

It was not long after, that Aunt Rose died suddenly from heart failure, and she, who had always prided herself upon her pious public giving, had left her large fortune to charity, and an annuity of just £100 a year to her sister! Once or twice in my life I have fairly boiled with indignation. I boiled then, and in contemplating Aunt Prue's position I suggested the will should be contested. But what was the

use? It turned out that Aunt Prue was actually grateful, for "Rosie was such a *good* woman!" Overwhelmed with grief for the loss of her sister, she wrote the sweetest letters, discovering the nicest traits of character in "your poor dear aunt" that only lived in her own gentle imagination. And so she fretted and fretted. I wanted her to come on a visit to me—a permanent visit. I intended mooting this idea when I attended the funeral, but a severe chill, which for some days had kept me in bed, prevented my undertaking the journey. So, as a preliminary, I wrote to her that I was still feeling weak and depressed, adding, "I want you so, dear Aunt Prue." The following day I had her with me safe and sound, with the intention of kidnapping her for ever. I was, therefore, not a little surprised when, after a month had elapsed, she remarked, nervously putting her cap straight: "My dear, I have been having a very long and earnest conversation with your kind friend Mr. Ryan, and I gather that a relative of his who lives in Berlin is anxious for the companionship of an English lady of experience, to keep house, and I am debating if—if I——"

"Certainly not!" I burst out. "What could have possessed Mr. Ryan—oh, did you ask him?"

Aunt Prue smiled guiltily, and nodded her head. "I thought I might—" she faltered. "Of course, for no monetary payment. There certainly is a large family, and wealth and society, and so on; after all," she admitted lamely, "I don't see quite that I could be of much use."

"You preposterous aunt!" I exclaimed. I was thankful she did not pursue the matter but it gave me an inkling that the "permanence" was going to prove a myth. I implored her never to leave me. "Why not let me smooth your old age, when it comes," I pleaded, "and you soothe mine?"

She smiled, but she shook her head. "Yes, Dearie. I'm getting quite old now, which is all the more reason and the better excuse to choose my alternative and go and live in some quiet spot where there are flowers—plenty of flowers! In your bright home I couldn't help feeling I should be a trouble and out of place, even if I weren't."

"Aunt Prue!" I protested reproachfully.

"No, Dearie. I'll take a couple of rooms in some cottage in the middle of a garden. With what dear, kind Rosie has left me I shall be independent again—indeed, quite rich. A hundred a year will more than suffice for my wants. Why, I can live like a queen!"

Her heart was absolutely set on the idea, so fixedly that there was no gainsaying her. She was not a woman easily to be dissuaded from what she thought was right. And now she took a childish delight in carrying out her plans.

In a pretty cottage belonging to Lambert's parents my Aunt Prue was duly installed. The choice appeared in every way satisfactory, for the cottage was situated not very far from Barbara—and she and Barbara seemed to have closer bonds of sympathy than ever before. The owner, too, was a nursery gardener, so that there were flowers in plenty. My aunt's pleasure knew no bounds. Her sitting-room was on one side of the porch, and her bedroom was above. The house at Bath had been sold, but her cherished furniture from its cosy parlour had been removed, and was now arranged at Hawthorne Cottage as nearly as possible as it used to be. I often went to see her, and so did Barbara and her brother. It was always a treat for me, though she would never believe it ; and I humbly took from her a mental lesson of how to grow old sweetly. Sometimes on a Sunday my son would accompany me, and enjoy himself immensely.

Aunt Prue was as happy in her retreat as the days were long, or short, as the case might be.

The neighbourhood soon knew her and loved her, and again in the humble dwellings round about she became "our Miss Whyte," with an emphasis on the pronoun which implied, "not by any means to be confounded with any other Miss Whyte that might exist anywhere else, or in whom any less fortunate persons might take an interest." Lambert told me—I well recognised the ways—that where there was trouble or suffering in the neighbourhood, thither Aunt Prue would trot with heart and basket overflowing with comforts. The ragged children would nod and curtsey to the "great lady" as she passed, and receive her customary smile and coppers. Great lady she was still, no matter what her surroundings; even though her sunshade let the April shower trickle in, and her gown remained untrimmed, her bonnet had seen much service, and her cotton gloves were darned—beautifully darned—Aunt Prue was a great lady still; and the necessaries of which she deprived herself she gave to those she deemed were more needy than she was.

Otherwise, she preferred always to keep within the precincts of her little garden. "I am so happy!" she would remark; "I have all I want, and more. And am I not rich, too, in the affection of you all?"

During one of these visits to her she produced, with some mystery and considerable pride, a packet which I recollected having seen before.

"Look here, Dearie, I want to show you this," she said, spreading before me some sheets of MS. "Just fancy! Dear Rosie actually wrote a story for children, and I never knew she could write at all! She never breathed a word about it to me." (Which made me determine to keep my recollection to myself.) "*Now* I know from whom you inherited your talent," she continued brightly, in delight at her discovery. "Why, it was in the family all the time!"

"Just fancy!" I rejoined lamely, as I turned over the pages, which had not been typewritten after all.

"I've read it myself, and I should so much like you to read it too, and advise what should be done with it. I'm anxious to know what you think. I'll be guided by you."

"I'll read it at once."

I pretended to, but I really couldn't trust myself to do so with Aunt Prue's eyes on me all the time. Before long I gathered the sheets together and said:

"I think that it is rather beyond children,

and might not be sufficiently appreciated by grown-ups."

Aunt Prue shot a rapid glance at me—it was an anxious glance—but seeing I was quite serious, she replied with some relief, I thought, "Then I'll just put it carefully away, shall I?"

"Indefinitely," I added quietly.

My son had grown very tall, but in face he looked more youthful than his fifteen years warranted. Charlie had been forgiven, and came to us frequently, as of yore. Now I had to look up at my son as he said:

"Angel"—(it would have been quite a ridiculous reputation to live up to, from a woman's point of view, but for the half-bantering, half-affectionate manner in which it was said)—"I have asked Wallace to afternoon tea next Saturday. You will like him. He is very artistic in his tastes. And, by-the-by, would you please just mention casually afterwards that you have no objection to smoking?"

"Smoking!"

"Yes. He smokes cigarettes. I tell him it is awfully bad for him. He isn't any older than I am, but," added my son rather ruefully, "he seems so somehow; so, please, don't give him any of your views on smoking. And do be careful."

Before Saturday arrived I had been so admonished that I began to feel like expecting Royalty.

When the friend entered, my maternal pride was flattered to find that he was not nearly so tall nor so well developed as my son. My mind flew to the "smoking" as the cause ; but I kept my thoughts to myself—I was very careful. Moreover, he was not so intellectual, but he was certainly more manly. His collars, too, were "a great attraction," and they were of the newest style ; so was his beautiful neck-tie.

He made me feel quite at home. My son was right—I did like his friend. After I had poured out tea, and they had seen to my comfort, I suddenly turned hot all over, for the thought occurred to me that I had not been instructed as to the necessity or not of saying *Mr.* Wallace. Here was an opportunity for a terrible *faux pas.* I was at my wits' end. I chose a favourable second, and, unobserved by his friend, I attracted my son's attention, and elevating my eyebrows to their utmost capacity, I mouthed the word "Mr." It certainly is a difficult word to convey, and that may account for my son's dulness. He looked puzzled and desperately anxious. I tried again ; this time

it was even more of a fiasco, for I was all but caught. So I smiled sweetly, and gently coughing, I decided to be on the safe side and call young Wallace "You."

This caused some slight confusion at first; and then I gladly noticed that my son understood my dilemma. He shrugged his shoulders. He evidently could not advise, but refrained from replying until he had made certain that I addressed *him;* which was also somewhat awkward, as I dared not, without previous permission, call my son by his first name, and I really could not bring myself to call him by his surname. Fancy the Queen calling the Prince of Wales "Guelph" or "de Wettin" to oblige the Crown Prince!

As "You" rattled on amusingly from one subject to another, his smooth cheeks so newly shaven, and his whole manner so pleasing, one forgave him his feverish, hot-house young manliness in the certain prospect of the attractive man he would soon become. His laugh, too, was infectious, and I felt he had been very hardly used when he frankly mentioned he had been "plucked at the exam."

"There are cigarettes on that table," I said composedly. "Oh no! I have no objection." My son looked gratefully at the tablecloth.

Later, when "You" rose to go, he said to me in his easy, jaunty way:

"I've enjoyed our chat immensely. So glad to have met you!"

It was during the winter holidays that one bleak, chilly morning—and that year seemed bleaker and chillier than usual—as gusts of cold air were rustling and bowling the dead leaves along in front of Hawthorne Cottage, and the trees were nodding and bowing us an enforced welcome, we two "surprised" Aunt Prue. She liked that sort of surprise, and she laughed as she folded in blue paper the old lace cap she had just been washing and ironing, with the remark that it hardly held together. However! it was real lace, and a remnant of the past.

After luncheon the walnuts and port wine had been removed, and my aunt was so happy with us beside her. We listened with delight as she recalled memories of her youth, and told us of the time when she went to balls wearing apple-blossom in her hair; and when she finished up with "However! it's all such a long time ago!" we begged for more. "Not about myself," she pleaded, with her expression of wistful humour.

"Then do please tell the boy about his great-great-aunt." She looked at him doubtfully,

but as he nodded his approval, she contentedly clasped her hands and laid them in her lap. Then she began pensively:

"Poor dear mother! She married very young, after being brought up very strictly by her grandmother and her aunt—two disciplinarians who treated her harshly. I have heard her say that when she was in her teens, as she was so short, they tried the remedy, not unknown in those days, of making her hang on the door. It was a mercy she was got away from them. I remember her as a pretty, gentle little woman, and my father adored her. They went together to George IV.'s coronation, and her hair was dressed before dawn, as it was very elaborately worn and very high; some of her friends had theirs dressed overnight, and slept propped up. They started at six o'clock in the morning, and their hackney-coach broke down going over Westminster Bridge, and she had to walk in her white satin shoes through the mud." She was interrupted in her reminiscences by a vagrant black cat which had jumped on the window-sill, and was looking longingly at the yellow tit-bit fluttering inside the old gilt cage. Aunt Prue got up.

"Sh—sh! Go away, you horrid poacher!" she cried, tapping on the window; cats really,

were her *bêtes noires*, no matter what their colour. "There are so many of them," she pleaded, "and they trample on the plants and kill the dear birds. But if they eat up any more, Lambert advises giving them—a little *bread and butter!*" There was a terrible significance in her words. Just then the garden gate swung open, and the postman slouched up the path. He left a letter for Aunt Prue. When she opened it I noticed it was a few lines in Mr. Ryan's handwriting, with an enclosure on foreign paper. I felt curious as I nodded acquiescence to her "Excuse me a moment!" and watched her expressive face. "Oh dear me—dear me!" she ejaculated once or twice, then handed it all to me without comment.

"Why did Mr. Ryan send you this?" I asked, much concerned, after I had read it. (My son raised his eyebrows; I nodded, and he discreetly withdrew. I do like boys to have tact.)

"Dearie, I made Mr. Ryan promise to let me know if at any time I could be of any special use in this world. After reading this letter it's quite clear that I cannot go on leading a selfish and purposeless existence such as mine has been since dear Rose died. I must go."

"But, my dear Aunt Prue, how can you be so quixotic?" I protested, alarmed at her

attitude. "You want to go off like a firework, with no adequate reason. It would be perfect madness for you to go and devote yourself to an eccentric old creature like this Herr—Herr Josef Blum. If he has a quarrel with his relatives, and insists upon living like the miser he is in a garret in Naples, it's not for you to interfere. You can't realise what it would mean. And if he prefers it, why not leave him alone?"

"But it would be a charity, as his sister writes, if some one could be found to stop such a scandal and to look after him. You see, he must be a worthy man, and he has consented to interview a stranger about the arranging of some abode, only it must be an *English* housekeeper, which is curious; and you see he adheres to his resentment against the whole of his family, from whom he seems to have separated finally—I wonder why!"

"I cannot forgive Mr. Ryan," I said, with rising tears.

"Dearie pet, a man of honour cannot go against his word."

"Then you ought never to have made him promise," I protested, with the vision of losing Aunt Prue looming so large and so near. "I want you to stay here; we all want you here;

and you are happy here—you always say so," I continued, with rising excitement.

"But I can be of real use there; think of that!" she said enthusiastically; "and all this time has been wasted in growing selfish." She folded me in her arms, adding soothingly, "We'll talk it all over some other time," and her dear hand wandered like a caress amongst the little curls on my forehead.

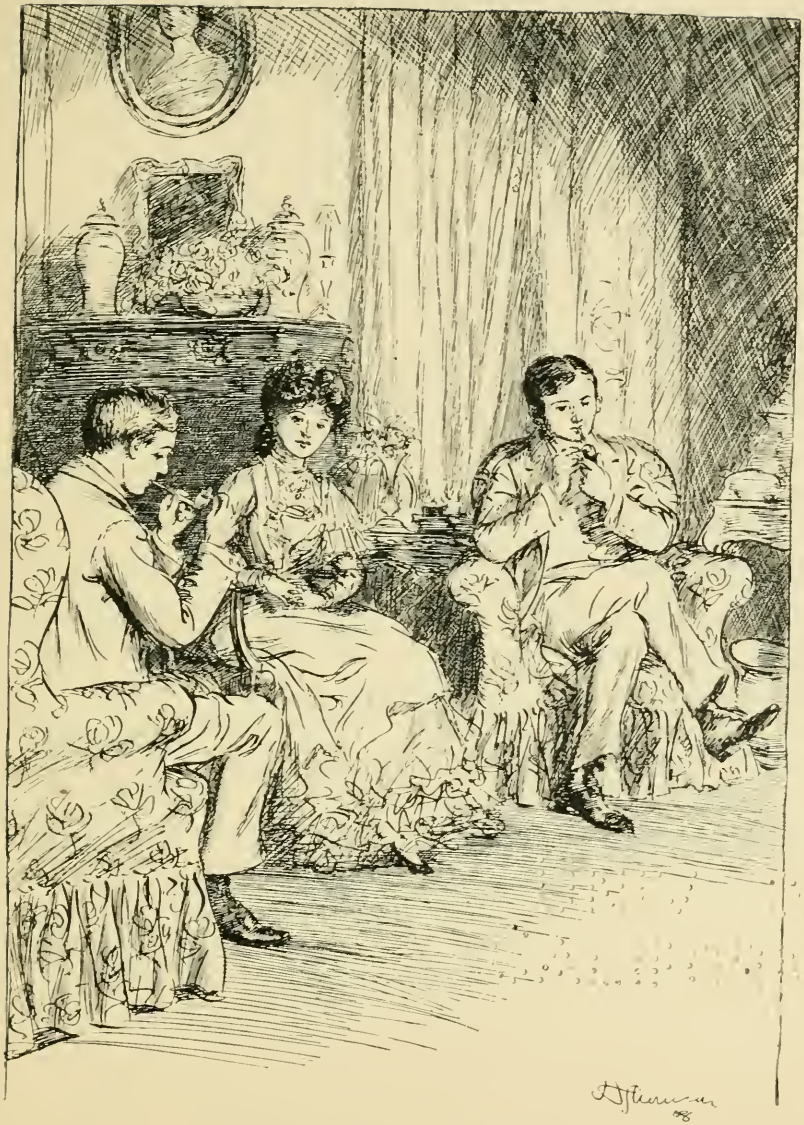
Of course she would go—nothing would dissuade her from starting off to the rescue of the horrid old creature who had fled to an inn garret in the cheapest and dirtiest part of Naples. His family abroad had always been very reticent about him, and now all we could gather was that he had fabulous wealth and was "very eccentric." We used every argument to dissuade her. Mr. Ryan himself was penitent and apologetic, and strove to turn her from her purpose. He had imagined she would never seriously consider the matter, especially as she had relinquished the former offer, which would have been far more suitable. But no, Aunt Prue liked the idea of reclaiming the "poor old man," and, if possible, making him a civilised being again.

So all I could do for her was to find a temporary tenant, which I reluctantly did, to take

immediate possession of her cherished rooms in Hawthorne Cottage. Then I insisted upon handing over my Lambert as Aunt Prue's maid —Lambert kindly "obliging" me; and then my misery was crowned by being present with the others to see them both off one foggy, depressing February morning. Anything more hare-brained than this departure I could not conceive; and whether I was more angry or sad at the parting I could not say. I felt that I should never see her ever any more, even while I was dismally promising to visit her at Naples when my son was older and would have to carry out the plan of finishing his scientific studies in Germany. The affectionate adieux were over, and Aunt Prue, the personification of cheeriness, was standing at the open window of her compartment. The guard waved his green flag. She leant forward and repeated earnestly:

"Good-bye, Dearie! God bless you and your boy!"

"Good-bye, Aunt Prue; God bless you too!" I faltered, forcing a smile, and the train quickly bore her out of sight.



They Lighted their Pipes

CHAPTER V

MY SON'S FRIEND

CHARLIE was at college, and we had seen nothing of him for a long time; but he had written that he, like my son, had decided on electro-chemistry as a profession. One evening he took us by surprise, and we were all very happy to be together again. He was just nineteen, and had grown taller than my big boy. At my invitation they lighted their pipes, and settled themselves comfortably for a long talk.

Though they discussed the play, "the Profession" in general, and the actresses of the day in particular, and then slid naturally on to free-thought and Kant and Herbert Spencer, I was not alarmed, for I recognised the phases. Besides, it amused me to watch the contrast in the appearance of the two—the one, fair and fresh-looking; my son, dark and serious. But their tastes and hobbies were similar, and they were as firm chums as ever. Then my attention was powerfully attracted by Charlie's boots; they

were most elegant, and as pointed as the ace of spades. My son had just emerged from the boot craze. Like his childish ailments, he always took his crazes mildly, and had lately recovered, relapsing into round-toed footgear after well-deserved suffering, stoically borne. His walking-stick craze had likewise been of short duration. He had affected an inartistic-looking object with a huge crook. One day he came home without it. He had not seemed concerned—and I heaved a little sigh of relief——

"Dreaming?" said a voice.

I raised my eyes from those shining boots and joined apologetically in the laughter.

"Oh, Mr. Lane, I forgot! I congratulate you very heartily upon gaining your scholarship. You must have worked very hard at Cambridge."

Charlie smiled and thanked me awkwardly. He had grown rather nervous, and at times, in eager moments, he stammered slightly—almost blushed.

"Yes, we boys must work hard nowadays." ("Boys!" I thought to myself. Was the "Manly Craze" so soon over?) "The exams. are so very stiff! But please don't call me 'Mr.' You never used to."

I looked towards my son for orders. He gave a surreptitious nod of consent. We spent a very merry evening.

"I hope I shall soon see you again," said Charlie to me, with shy cordiality, on leaving.

The following evening my son went to his first dinner-party. He had always refused invitations before, on the philosophic plea that society functions and scientific study were antagonistic in aim and interest. But this time I had persuaded him to accept; and he seemed glad.

Before dressing he certainly looked disconsolate, and kept on yawning immoderately. I put it down to nervousness and said nothing. When he reappeared on the scene in well-fitting evening-dress he looked very wide awake indeed, and my heart gave a little throb of pride. "I don't quite like leaving you alone, Mater," he said. I gently demurred; and his heavy tread was soon out of the house, and was followed by the usual little feeling of void within me.

I was not in a humour to write; nor was I in a sociable mood, which was fortunate enough, for I couldn't have sent for Dulcie. I knew she had gone to the dinner-party too, so I resolved on laziness as the easiest way out of everything.

My Son and I

As I sat over the fire musing of how my boy and I had always been all in all to one another, a feeling of amused satisfaction came over me when I remembered what a wrench it was only a few years ago when I gave him that little figurative push-out-of-the-nest needful to his manliness—insisting that he should take up all the responsibilities of his age and position. He had thus come to see that he could think and judge and act for both of us, and was all the happier for it. Then I thought of how Mr. Ryan had been my literary adviser to such good purpose that the second volume of my fairy tales had appeared. Those stories had accomplished their object, for my son when little had read them with eager enjoyment; as he grew older, however, he frankly owned he hated fairy tales, and loved the blood-curdliest of adventure books. He would look up from one panting, and with dilated eyes, and muscles taut round the corners of his mouth, to inform me that "Marlow the pirate is hiding at moonlight amidst the wreckage of the abandoned ship, matchlock in hand, awaiting the boatload of brave bluejackets singing as they drew gaily alongside——" I'm not fond of being harrowed, and I remember how I made up my mind to look with particular care under my

bed that night. Once more absorbed in this book, he emitted a loud chuckle, and looking up again, exclaimed:

"Ha, ha! Muz, Jock Merryfield saw Marlow just in time, snatched the matchlock from his grasp, broke it over his head, and kicked him in the stomach. Wasn't it splendid of him?"

"Glorious, indeed," I replied, and added something about "it's getting late," and "bed"; but at such a juncture he would go stone-deaf, and bed never existed for him until he was forced to tumble into it or read in the dark, as I had "a beastly trick," he protested, of ringing for the lights to be turned out.

I discovered soon after that he had dropped this form of literature by his alluding to it with contempt, and glowing with enthusiasm over Milton. I don't know whether I was more pleased or surprised to find that another link had suddenly sprung up between us. Mr. Ryan's library offered a fine choice, and when my son accompanied me to dinner next door, our host would discuss with him the last volume of poems or the classic he had lent, and took delight in changing it for another. There were important discussions, too, at these times about my son's studies and career. Mr. Ryan and Dulcie frequently dined with us, alternately,

more or less, and we parents both remarked with regret how shyly reticent the young people always remained towards one another.

With Aunt Prue continuously away year after year, and Barbara quieter and less sociable than of yore, I should have felt neglected had it not been for that neighbourly intercourse ; for, with the exception of one or two others, every one else of my circle came more or less under the category of mere acquaintances. Barbara, indeed, was greatly changed. I have known several instances of a love disappointment causing a girl to soften in her nature and to give herself up to the care for others, but it was exactly the opposite in Barbara's case. She, like the greater number, became morose and discontented under suffering, and her brother's recent marriage brought about no improvement. Barbara got on indifferently with her sister-in-law, and but for Lawrence's entreaties she would have left them both to live alone in the little house in Highgate. He couldn't bear the idea of her leaving her old home and cherished garden to take lodgings or live at a boarding-house after all her past devotion to him. He guessed at her trouble, and so he was constantly patching up the little dissensions between the two young women. There was no

longer an angel in the house. Barbara seemed to lose her taste for visitors, so I rarely went, and then only by special invitation.

I had trained Dulcie in secretarial work so that she was able to help her father as I had done in the early days, and she was devoted to him and his career. As I had been continuously consulted with regard to her education, and was glad to be of use in choosing her governesses and superintending her finishing studies, her affection was very dear to me indeed. My son no longer hated fairy tales, and his "higher criticism" was often useful. He continued always to take interest in discussing and advising on those little fancies, and was apt to get tragically aggressive if I differed from him—out of all proportion to the importance of the subject. "Because you *are* so obstinate," he would insist. He, also, had literary aspirations, but they were of a surreptitious kind. He was not a very tidy person; in fact, the topsy-turvydom of his own sanctum, throughout the gamut of nursery, schoolroom, study, and smoking-room, had combined to give me the first grey hair I ever pulled out. It was in the personal tidying of the said den, in which life-long habit had given me a right-of-way, that I found some lines by him in MS. I didn't quite

grasp their meaning, which perhaps led me to think them excellent parody—at least good enough to be rescued from chaos and oblivion ; and after a deal of worrying and insistence that they were *not* "awful rot," I prevailed upon him to send them to his College magazine, where I had often longed to see something by him amongst the effusions of the other students. It was on the table near me now; I took it up and read the lines with pride aloud, trying to remember their application, which he had explained to me fully and with care :—

THE ASSOCIATESHIP COURSE IN CHEMISTRY

(A First Approximation)

All our world's a lab.,
And all the men and women merely students :
They have their failures and their passes, too ;
And one man in his time takes many "Parts,"
His course being seven sessions. At first the fresher,
Cooking and guessing through his Part I. Chem.,
And then the wary student, finding wave-lengths,
With sulky, sultry face, groping like mole,
Ahead of lectures, far. And then the "Asset,"
Sighing like furnace, with a wistful sorrow
Caused by his Wednesday's lecture. Then a scrambler,
Full of strange oaths, and rushed like an express,
Guessing at crystals, lucky in shots at "spotting,"
Seeking some learning in "Organic,"
Even taking Graphics too. The Third-year Chemist,

In high good humour with correct results,
And lecturer, with beard of formal cut,
Full of wise laws and modern instances ;
And so he spends his time. And this Part shifts
Into the pale and panting "First class" man
With towel round head, and coffee near ;
His youthful cheek, well shaved, a world too white
For his good health ; and his big manly heart,
Turning again towards childish terror, sinks,
All thumping, to his boots ! Last scene of all,
That ends this strange, eventful history,
Is passing high in list, and then a dem.-ship,
Sans peace, sans rest, sans thanks, sans everything.

I replaced the magazine. The explanations had been wasted, for I was little wiser ; nevertheless the lines had been appreciated in the right quarter—I had heard that and rejoiced.

I thought of those red-letter days when he matriculated first class; when the first envelope came addressed to him with A.R.C.S. after his name ; and again, in due course, with the augmentation, A.I.C. He never was sanguine about any exams., and I have often laughed at all the good sympathy I have wasted in trying to cheer him over the coming failure. "However!" as dear Aunt Prue would say—and, in fact, did write when she heard—we were nerved for disappointment.

At last I was roused by hearing the latchkey in the door and the clock strike eleven—and in walked the young master of my thoughts.

"Now, tell me all about it," I said, as we settled down comfortably side by side in a favourite cosy corner.

"Very well, Mater; but no interruptions, please." I agreed. But it was very hard. "Well, first of all, to my surprise I met that fellow Simpson who used to go to our school." (I remembered Simpson, Esq.) "He has grown a beard—looked awfully funny. Charlie was there, and took in a jolly-looking girl—a Miss Dryden—no relation to the poet, I believe. And there was the usual crew; only spinsters and bachelors. I took Dulcie in to dinner. She was very demure, and inclined to be silent. I put her through her paces all right, but she made it very difficult. And I didn't want to talk much myself."

"I hope you were not thinking of 'catalytic action,' and that you offered her your right arm to take her in," I said, forgetting my promise. "Did she look nice?"

"Same as usual. It never occurred to me that there was a wrong arm to offer—or probably I should have offered it." He thought a moment, and then he added, "It was lucky that. And *Punch*, you know, Mater, helped me a lot. I remembered Du Maurier's pictures of smart dinner-parties where etiquette was

everything; and I kept a sharp lookout on the other fellows. When the ladies had gone upstairs we talked about things in general. . . . You are not to interrupt. No, I only drank water. Wine is apt to make one too communicative, and I wanted to maintain an elegant reserve. Later on the others played games; and there was a bit of a dance; but it was a bore—an awful bore. I should have preferred keeping you company, Mater, really."

He gave a timely yawn, and we said good-night.

When my son was about to come of age, we had grand plans of giving a ball to celebrate the event. It seemed, however, that this festivity was not likely to take place. His health, I fear, had been strained by his forced work, and was causing me anxiety, which quickly changed to real alarm. A weak throat was somewhat constitutional with him, but when Dr. Charleston gently advised me in a round-about way—the gist of which resolved itself into the fact that an operation was urgently necessary—I thought the end of the world had come.

"Our Scientific Department will be all right, little lady. I'll get the best specialist to do it,

and I can assure you it is nothing at all complicated."

"You see, Mater," said my son, "if it is done quickly there'll still be time to have the ball on the right date, and I don't mean to be done out of our first dance."

He took the idea with the same sang-froid as he took most things, and even entered with a horrid zest that scientific minds seem to possess into every phase and particular of the operation, discussing with genuine interest all the arrangements and particulars.

As the day drew near I would lie sleepless at night picturing myself bereft of my son, praying that my all should not be taken from me, thinking of what Aunt Rose had said long ago about the eventuality of his not attaining the age of twenty-one, and taking, I fear, an unholy joy in her not being alive to contemplate the possible spoil.

The hospital nurse had arrived—a pleasant-faced girl, upon whom my son looked with eyes of strong approval. In the drawing-room, the lightest room in the house, appeared a long table, and the place was smothered in white sheets. My son and I were expecting the doctors, and whilst we waited we played a game of chess, and he was winning—which was

unusual. A carriage came round the square and drew up, followed by another. The front-door bell rang, and we exchanged glances.

"Courage, mother!"

I was pacing up and down my room. I knew exactly when it was being done—I felt it, and shuddered. The house was very still. I thought I heard a cry. I couldn't stand the suspense any longer. I opened the door—my hand could hardly grasp the handle—and went out on the landing. I saw them come out of the drawing-room carrying my son inanimate, and his white face and hair were all blood-stained.

"Go back!" said Dr. Charleston sternly. "I strictly forbade you."

And I thought aimlessly to myself,

"It's all very well to say 'Go back!' but I can't!" I must have fallen where I was, for I was still on the landing, but my neck was bare.

"He's all right, my dear lady," Dr. Charleston was saying. "Just pull yourself together and come and judge for yourself. It was a beautiful little operation. I know it will do him good if you'll come."

I didn't require any pressing, only a little help to get on to my feet.

I saw him in his bed—like a young sapling stricken down. The doctors were with him,

and Nurse Patrick was stanching with cotton-wool the blood which oozed to his lips from the wound. He opened his eyes; he scarcely seemed to know me, but he certainly tried to smile at me. I kissed his hand lying so suddenly helpless, murmured a few words of satisfaction and encouragement, and went back to my room to pray in fervent thanksgiving. Dulcie was soon by my side.

The first thing my son did was to fall head over ears in love with Nurse Patrick, although she insisted upon treating him as a mere child, which I should have thought ought to prove fatal to any such ardent passion; and he didn't seem at all thankful for his rapid convalescence —he only saw the day drawing near when Nurse Patrick must leave to undertake "a more interesting case."

He did another thing, too, which was disconcerting. When I came in to help in nursing him I always had to make my entry with my eyes shut, because of the gruesome objects he was sure to be handling as a scientific pastime. In this way I gave him time to hide them, as two experiences had been enough for me. The first was when I had surprised him—or, rather, when he had surprised me—with a phial of spirits in which he had actually been pickling,

to cut into sections for his microscope, what he had arranged for with his operator. The second time he was surrounded by human bones on the chairs and bed, and was handling a "thigh-bone"; and he couldn't understand my objection, "considering they belonged to prehistoric man, and have lain under sand for thousands of years, and are being arranged for a collection." I explained that human bones are human, no matter how old or how much sand, and I preferred in future to make my entry in my own way and be spared further gruesome sights.

Although he turned his head away, I believe he shed a tear or two when Nurse Patrick left —I suppose he wasn't quite strong—and he didn't seem to notice how laughing and cheery she was. I asked for her address, and he visibly brightened.

On the date of his coming of age, the ball we had long talked of took place, as he had predicted; for, thank God, he was well again. There was so much bustle and excitement before the evening that his anxiety as to whether my pink satin dress really had come surprised me. But when I wore it and entered the drawing-room, I understood his curiosity. For without my knowledge he had had the room transformed into a veritable bower of pink

carnations while I was dressing. He looked satisfied, and then tore upstairs to what he called his "tiring-room."

A still greater surprise awaited me.

The first to arrive, unfashionably early, was Charlie. He glanced nervously about, seemed ill at ease, and the slight stammer was again perceptible.

"You have not been well," he said, concerned and anxious, taking a rapid, affectionate glance at me. "Do take care of yourself."

"I was only a little tired from nursing; it was nothing," I rejoined, smiling; "and I don't intend to be an invalid. Besides, I'm getting an old lady now." (Of course I'm not.)

He didn't enter into my tone of levity, but looked vexed. At that moment our neighbours arrived, and my son entered by another door, rather out of breath, and trying to look as though he had been waiting about for ages.

We had the satisfaction of receiving, amongst other guests, many "boys from our school," whose appearance certainly belied the expression; but they were good dancers, and the scene was very gay and animated.

Charlie, to my concern, had disappeared; but when at the end of the evening I stood alone—my son having gone to see the last

two ladies to their carriage—he suddenly appeared before me like some dejected spirit.

"What is the matter, Charlie?" I asked. "I fear you have been lonely and neglected."

"I am never lonely with this."

He pulled a case out of his pocket, and, to my astonishment, showed me my own portrait.

"You see, I wear it near my heart."

"I never knew you had it. If I ask you for it," I added, gently but firmly, "you will give it to me. And I do ask you for it."

He looked at it wistfully as I took it from his hand.

"You—you have always been so good and kind to me," he stammered. "I shall never love any one else, and my one wish is that some day you would be my wife."

I almost lost my breath.

"Now listen to me, Charlie," I replied, with all the serious dignity I could command. "You have mistaken your feelings; and you are not the first of your age who has done so, by any means. Young men are apt to become infatuated with women double their own age. You mustn't mind the expression, but it is a craze, like so many others that people go through. And later on those women earn the gratitude of those same young men after they have realised

the explanation—that the feeling of youthful sympathy, allied to a chivalrous recognition of small or fancied favours, is *not* love. Remember, a man's part is to love and protect a younger woman ; it is not for the man to take experience from his wife, which she began to accumulate before he was born. Is it not so ? I have tried to make you realise your real feelings. May I not go on trying ?"

I held out my hand, and as he bent over it I thought of curly-headed Charlie of many years ago. The top-knot now was only the ghost of its former self ; but some hairs still stuck up on end at the back in their old ludicrous, obstinate way. A tear fell on my hand, and reminded me of those I had kissed away.

"I wish I could do something for you," he remarked in steady, manly tones. "If you would only let me do something for you it would make me feel happier."

"You can indeed do much for me," I replied ; and his flushed face brightened. "Be a firm friend to my son. When you both leave to-morrow to study your chemistry together, let me feel for both your sakes that while you are in Germany you will be a friend to him if necessary, in times of temptation to dissuade him from doing what I would not approve ; and

that, with your more sanguine nature, you will cheer him should he feel lonely or discouraged."

"I promise. Good-bye."

Reverently he raised both my hands to his lips, and hurried away.

When my son entered he said:

"Charlie has just slunk off. What's up? I know he thinks tons of you. By Jove! Has he been talking to you—about——"

I remained silent.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed, looking at me curiously. Then, thoughtfully twirling his moustachelette, he added:

"No. Did he really?"

I nodded.

"What cheek! Silly ass, isn't he?"

I nodded again and laughed.

"But," he added, "I don't exactly blame him, all the same, silly fool!"

"It must be a secret," I said, "but I tell you because it is the crowning craze of youth, and one you should know how to avoid. So be warned, and——"

"No preaching!" He folded me in his great arms. And when that baby of mine held me tight, and told me with a smile, "All the fellows say I've a stunning little mother," I felt very grateful to my son's friends for letting him know it.

CHAPTER VI

OLD JOSEF BLUM

It was a great wrench, that first separation from my son, made worse, too, by the knowledge that with rare intervals our lives would have to be lived apart for some time to come. For the next two or three years it was necessary that he should study abroad, and although I might have accompanied him, I reluctantly saw the wisdom, as Mr. Ryan expressed it, of freeing him of home influence and of letting him see something of the world and there find his own level. He was twenty-one. I had done my best to fit him for his position, and now I felt it was best for him to be without me; and those sentiments had his full concurrence, of course! I quite understood. It had been arranged that he and Charlie Lane should go to Rostock in Germany, which was a university town, and there they would have the additional advantage of lodging at the

house of his old governess, Fräulein Heinrich, who lived with her father, one of the professors, and let rooms to young students. He would have to learn German well, and he regretted now that he knew so little.

So on the morning following the ball he came to my room to bid me good-bye, clad in the shaggiest of new ulsters, and carrying the newest of fitted bags.

"It is natural, I suppose," I tried to impress upon myself as he hugged me and didn't seem at all to share my sadness at parting; in fact, he was in such especially high spirits that, after all, they left an impression of being somewhat unnatural, which was some comfort. He had arranged to meet Charlie at the station, and wouldn't hear of my getting up early after the fatigue of our entertainment.

"Good-bye, little mother. Take care of yourself, now that I shall not be there to see you don't do absurd things."

"Good-bye, darling; and listen," I called after him as he was hurrying out.

"Yes."

"Don't sit in wet boots."

"Of course, I should prefer to sit indoors," he replied, laughing; and I laughed too. I heard him chuckle on the landing, and his

heavy tread descended the stairs. The door banged, and the cab drove away.

When Dulcie kindly came, and herself brought in my breakfast tray, she found me in tears. She came to insist upon a hurried visit to the bonnet lady, so as to capture a tulle bonnet she had seen for me, and which was to be sent away on approval at noon unless I went to see if I liked it. I protested that no tulle bonnet ever created could look well over a red nose and inflamed eyes ; but she argued that they couldn't remain red for ever, not even for an hour, so we went, and I was glad.

What was my surprise when I brought her back to lunch to find a handsome, golden-coloured collie dog stretched on the hearthrug, in quiet possession of the drawing-room.

"Some visitor must be here," I said, as I bent down and patted the furry head ; then I saw that a card was attached to the collar. "Dulcie, there's some writing. Let me see what it says : 'My name is MacDonald, introduced for kind acceptance by your old friend, A. R.' Dulcie ! from your father !"

She clapped her hands joyously at the success of their little scheme, and the dear dog let me hug him, and seemed to like it. It was such a sensible dog. I loved dogs, though I

had never possessed one, and I felt so cheered and pleased, and was more than thankful for the thought that prompted this alleviation of my loneliness.

My son had only been gone a few days when a letter came from Aunt Prue urging me to redeem my promise and pay her, without further delay, the visit she was so greatly longing for. As some of my acquaintances were preparing to go to Egypt, I arranged to travel in their company as far as Naples, and gladly telegraphed to Aunt Prue my prompt acceptance. Preparations had to be made hastily, and my kind neighbours took upon themselves to look after my affairs during an absence which might be of some months' duration, for Aunt Prue wished in her loving anxiety to keep me with her ; and there was no reason to deter me from enjoying the rest of the winter and early spring in her genial company and in the not less genial climate which had benefited me so much before.

How the recollections of long ago came back to me when I started once again on the journey to Naples! How distinctly I remembered standing on the steamer watching the same stretch of water widen and widen away from the land, and heard the same

hurrahs from the shore grow fainter and fainter ; but then my baby was in my arms blowing kisses, and now he was a man and a long way off. The thought of his being so far away was apt to start a lump in my throat and bring on a nervous feeling of panic, sternly repressed but constantly recurring.

Aunt Prue was not a great letter-writer, and beyond knowing she was comfortably installed at the Villa Bella Vista, and that Herr Josef Blum was more amenable than she had anticipated, I was not much the wiser regarding her welfare. For on the rare occasions on which she wrote she covered the notepaper with anxious inquiries about us all and our affairs, and with questions about friends and acquaintances, showing on what her thoughts most dwelt, without satisfying our hunger for details of herself and her surroundings. And Lambert, unfortunately, was "no scholar," a fact in which she took a shameless glory, with a habit of mentioning it at every available opportunity ; so there were no details to be gleaned from that quarter. I was glad when Aunt Prue wrote of Lambert's devotion to her, for it was my object that she should have some one she could rely upon, who knew her ways and would take good care of her.

Old Josef Blum

When I arrived at the Villa Bella Vista I found with pleasure that it was smothered in flowers, and Lambert, like a bit of my own home, smilingly holding open the garden gate and greeting me with, "So glad to see you again, mem! Hope you are very well, mem! . . . Yes, thank you, mem, but it *is* an 'ole. So furrin!" What a joy to be in Aunt Prue's embrace again, with my arms scarcely meeting now around her more extended waist! And we forthwith began a chat that promised to be endless, so much was there to relate. She was as cheery as ever, and talked away with her usual animation, and the dear thumbs twirled with satisfaction while I glanced with curiosity at her surroundings. They were elegant in their simplicity, as the advertisements say. The sun was not very hot now, but it shone straight into the little *salon*, which was already so bright and sunny with its scheme of glowing colour, of palest yellow to deepest orange. I could see the whole scale of tints in the large bowl of nasturtiums on a table by the window. Outside, a frame of orange and lemon trees arched over a glorious view of the Mediterannean, with Vesuvius puffing out smoke in smouldering sulkiness in the near distance. My eyes had again wandered admiringly to the flowers

trailing carelessly along and over the cream canvas tablecloth, when Aunt Prue remarked that Herr Josef Blum always looked forward to the pleasure of a new acquaintance.

"I don't want to be introduced to a horrid old miser," I said. "Is there no escape?"

Aunt Prue shook her head and smiled. "I'm afraid not. Herr Blum wishes it, and, Dearie, you must remember that you are under his roof."

I shuddered a silent protest. "He's only eccentric and rather trying," added my aunt, in a comforting sort of way. "But he keeps to his own suite of rooms. During the ten years I have kept house for him he never comes here into my domain except to spend an hour one afternoon a week, when we take tea and he grumbles about the bills, as he thinks it good practice for his English, and I am hopeless at any other language. He says my accent is provincial."

"But he makes you handsome presents?"

"Presents! Oh dear, no! Nothing of that kind."

"What! no presents and no remuneration?"

She shook her head again and smiled.

"And English conversation thrown in!"

"Yes," she replied, laughing heartily. "He

enjoys that immensely, and that was the reason he insisted on some one English. You see, dear, I have a charming suite of rooms in a climate that suits my health, and he knows I am content."

"I think he might show a little gratitude after you've rescued him from his miserly habits and from living in scandalous squalor in the attic of a wretched inn."

"But," argued my aunt, "after all, his family asked me to. He is a bachelor, with only himself to consider, and I believe he really regrets those days. But he's very eccentric. For instance, he's furious about the beggars who constantly call at the villa. Servants will talk—and it is known that he's a millionaire."

"He's kind-hearted, then."

"My dear, all I know is that he abhors the sight of a beggar—it's a perfect craze. He gives strict orders that they are to be turned away without a word or a ha'penny; and he never ventures into the streets, except to go to the barber's close by, for fear of being accosted by a beggar. Whether it is that he hates the sight of poverty, or is outraged at being asked for money, I can't make out."

"How dreadful!"

"He gives me four pounds a week for

expenses every Monday afternoon, and punctually to the minute he grumbles because I don't return him more than I do from the previous week's amount. But of course there are Lambert, and Marita the cook, and I don't fancy I'm extravagant!"

"What a 'treasure' you are!" I exclaimed.

She laughed as she replied: "Oh, he doesn't think much of me, because I can't talk German or any language but my own, and that's a cardinal sin in his eyes. However! As a rule he receives no strangers, as talk with them is a waste of time, unless they have some linguistic acquirements and can enter into his tastes."

I could talk German, it is true, but not as fluently as at that moment I could have wished. And I have a fair knowledge of French and Italian, which, when I am nervous, are apt to get mixed. Accordingly, I prepared myself for an interview that would end in ignominy, for I knew Herr Josef Blum was in the habit of testing his visitors, and if he found them wanting, of bringing the acquaintance to a termination with a snap by a polite expression of thanks for the visit. My aunt also told me that the few he tolerated reported him to be full of knowledge of a kind. Moreover, it seemed to

interest them, too, to ponder what was going to become of his great wealth.

So I shrank from the introduction even more than before, when on the morrow the hour of my appointment was imminent for me to accompany the old gentleman on his promenade in the garden. I stepped out on the balcony. There he was, strolling feebly up and down, constantly looking up, and straight at me, but evidently without seeing me. I noticed that he was very short and very thin, and that he stooped slightly; he was dressed in a long grey suit, hanging very loose, and he wore a large straw hat and blue spectacles, which partly hid his features.

My aunt accompanied me downstairs to where he was.

"Herr Blum, this is my niece—my favourite niece," she said.

He bowed her away with some ceremony, and peered eagerly into my face. Then he said courteously, and in excellent English:

"I'm glad you've come. Welcome to Naples!"

He took my arm at once, and leaning on it lightly, he led me forward. His face was mild and worn, and when he looked over his spectacles his eyes, tired and bleared, were the eyes

of a man about eighty years of age. His whole appearance was that of an ascetic.

Then, with curious adroitness, he began the operation of sampling my brains, and revealed in the process a mastery of various languages, together with a childish pleasure in originating riddles, charades, and word juggling, his hobbies, he told me, of a lifetime. At the same time he put me at my ease, and was so ready and anxious to impart information, and was so courteous in his manner of correcting mistakes —he never would let them pass—correct them he would—that we were good friends before our *tête-à-tête* was at an end, and I came to the conclusion that either he had been very much maligned or my aunt had achieved a miracle. The next day the performance was repeated; at his urgent request, our two mornings' walks developed into a recognised institution, and we began to understand one another pretty well.

"I like you," he would repeat. "You understand me; you are patient with an old man. Now to-day let us talk of radium; tell me what the English papers have been saying—that must be interesting. But excuse me, before I forget —it is a habit of mine—try and guess my new riddle. . . ."

The sympathetic ring of his voice, and the

geniality that seemed in a fashion to breathe from him, were surprising in one so old. And I was still more surprised when I discovered that every one, without exception, seemed to have misjudged him. As I gained his confidence I could see that it amused him to be considered the hateful old miser. He tried to encourage it, even to live up to it. The truth is, he was no miser in the ordinary sense ; but he couldn't spend money in the way his large fortune warranted. "I can't!" he would exclaim plaintively — "I can't!" And he certainly couldn't.

He spent but a few centesimi a day upon a vegetarian diet which just supported his spare frame, satisfied, and no more, his meagre appetite and still more meagre wants.

"Come and see my kitchen," he said one day, in a burst of confidence. I followed him. It was a tiny apartment opening out of his study, and here he did his own cooking. "Good, *hein?*" he remarked, thrusting before me some plums he had been stewing. Suddenly his face lighted up, and he raised his hand for silence. I waited and watched the smile that proclaimed poetic fervour and prospective triumph. Then taking off his spectacles with his left hand, he held his right aloft, shaking his

forefinger as he exclaimed, with a giggle, "A charade! Listen:

"'A plum is a fruit you can easily cook—
And the study of life is as easy to some;
But search through a character cookery-book,
And admit that the heart's not so easy to *plumb!*'"

He looked at me in delight.

"Wonderful!" I cried; "and in English, too!"

He laughed like a child. "That is nothing," he said, frankly radiant; "any language. It is my two thousand eight hundred and forty-seventh. I must write it down or I shall forget it."

"That would be a great pity," I said.

"Indeed, yes," he rejoined, as he quickly settled himself at his writing-table. He looked quite youthful in his enthusiasm, and very neatly dressed, for his old clothes had recently been taken away from him when he slept—the usual course when new garments were necessary; it was the only way. He was in high enjoyment, for as to pleasures, he had none but those of conversation. He seldom strolled beyond his garden. Even the lovely view was denied him, as his poor eyes were too dimmed by past reading and present age to see and enjoy it.

His walk—his invariable walk, because it was

THE STONY PATH OF LIFE

shaded from the sun, which hurt his eyes in summer, and from the wind, which hurt his eyes in winter—was up the inclined pathway leading to a height which commanded the glorious scene over the Bay of Naples. No one could behold this steep road, with the old man toiling up it, and not be struck with the living allegory of the stony path of life, and he a striving spirit doomed to climb it daily towards the goal—the seat of rest at the summit. But he never succeeded in getting farther than the little arbour half-way up.

"Some day when I am stronger I'll go up to the top for you to see the view they talk about," he said, when we were starting for our walk. "But to-day," he went on, "I must go to have my hair cut."

He leaned on my arm and tottered on the way to the barber's, and I was to do a little shopping and then call back for him. His nervousness of the crowded roadway and its beggars made him pause constantly to look around. "Why don't you let the man come to you in your own home?" I asked him, as a sort of brilliant idea.

"Ach, my dear madam," he replied, "it is because the charge would be double—like this I pay twenty centesimi, and the master himself

must attend to me. He is a Spaniard, and I stipulate also he should speak in his own tongue; so I get Spanish conversation for nothing—see? Ach! how that pleases me—all for twenty centesimi!" and he released my arm, rubbed his palms together, and chuckled like a delighted child.

The next day we toiled, as usual, slowly to the arbour, while he eagerly expounded and quoted, with sudden interruptions at the remembrance of a riddle, accompanied by the usual apology—halting every few steps as he talked, foreign fashion, as if the better to punctuate his meaning. When we arrived at our destination, and he took rest, I read aloud from some foreign newspaper, while he listened with curious enjoyment for my mistakes of accent. Then he philologised, and became confidential, and sank into one of his depressed moods, complaining of his age and loneliness.

"But, Herr Blum," I said, to comfort him, "you have a large family in Germany who have your welfare at heart."

"Welfare?" he repeated, brightening up. "*They* don't want my welfare; they want my money. And—and they're not going to get it; and what's more," he added, chuckling,

"from the forbidden letters I get from them, they won't realise how little regard I have for the whole undeserving lot of them!" And for a time he sat rubbing his hands and chuckling, as he repeated with the frankest candour, "They're not going to get it!"

Then he would become suspicious of every one about him, and fill me with an indescribable repulsion which quickly changed to pity when he declared that no one had ever cared for him for himself. "Ach, my dear madam, had my eyes been closed to all the selfishness and self-interest that surrounded me, I might have been by now a happy grandfather, like my brother. There was a lady—so much like you—*so!*"

He broke off. His voice dropped, and I heard him mumble something about "death the better way"—a pathetic figure truly, with his fourscore years passed in self-inflicted misery. And he a deeply religious man, as he undoubtedly was.

He was in one of these moods when he asked me bluntly a few days later as we sat in the arbour:

"What did your aunt come here for? Why do you sacrifice yourself walking out with a decrepit, lonely old man like me?"

"My aunt left her home, where she was happy, because she has a strong sense of duty, and she found she might still be of some use, as your sister wrote to her."

"Don't mention that sister of mine," he interrupted excitedly; "she married out of the faith. She shan't have a penny! But—why have *you* sacrificed yourself?"

"As for me, why—well—" His face was so screwed up with peevish shrewdness and cunning at cornering me, as he thought, that I couldn't help smiling as I added, not without a touch of offended dignity:

"I think, Herr Blum, it was not I who sought the introduction. Indeed, I must confess that I rather—I rather shrank from it."

He looked relieved, removed his blue spectacles, and wiped them on a rag of a handkerchief that had escaped Aunt Prue's vigilant eye. "I enjoy your friendship, Herr Blum," I went on, "and I am grateful for your tuition. You interest me—just a little bit. But your money doesn't. Money matters distress you, and are distasteful to me, so let us forget them. Tell me about Schopenhauer, as you promised."

"Ach, yes, Schopenhauer," he repeated eagerly. He was again the schoolmaster, and

like a child he quickly forgot his suspicions in the fresh and congenial topic. But the subject often recurred. His wealth had spoiled his life and warped a disposition naturally gentle and sympathetic.

Once a week, as I said before, Herr Josef Blum took tea with my aunt in her little *salon* —on a Monday afternoon, after paying the weekly household expenses and getting through the weekly grumble. He would then enjoy his frugal meal with all the greater zest because he got it gratis—Aunt Prue's tea being always a Christmas gift from Dr. Charleston, a custom begun when they were first acquainted, when he had recommended it, and never discontinued. Not being treated at all as a stranger, I was always at these quaintly stiff interviews, and the attitude of the pair gave me no little amusement. Before tea he was courteous and cantankerous ; Aunt Prue nervous and flustered, not being good at figures, whilst he peered at them as sharp as a needle. During tea he was courteous and gloatingly thirsty ; Aunt Prue dignified, and finding comfort in the very proximity of her own silver teapot. After tea he was courteous and depressed ; Aunt Prue resigned, and vigorously on the thumb-twirl. So one day when the time had come for his

poor old head to droop, and he started on the subject of having no friends, I asked permission to read aloud a rather long letter received some time back from my son, which I thought might interest them as showing something of the student life at Rostock. My aunt hailed the diversion from the usual distressing topic with evident pleasure, and the old man looked up, alert at once, in eager expectation, and remarked that it would remind him of his old college days long forgotten. So I took out the precious scrawl, for such it was, and read aloud :—

"My dear Mater,—Our hostess continues to do all she can for our comfort, so there is no reason for you to agonise about anything. We are both quite well, and all you can do, as you so kindly offer to do anything I want, is to get a firm grip of the fact that I am perfectly all right, and there is no cause for you to be anxious.

"Charlie had an engagement and missed a treat, for I spent a most interesting evening recently with the university students. I will tell you all about it. You can't interrupt at this distance.

"It was exactly 9.30 P.M. when my German

friend called for me, and after a few minutes' walk we came to the students' beer garden, where the *Kneipe* was held, and on the way he explained to me of what the students' clubs consist. There are, to begin with, in a university two sections, the fighting and the non-fighting. The former laugh at the latter, but do nothing more, so the others don't mind. The fighting section consists of 'corps,' which duel amongst themselves and with each other ; they revel in slashed cheeks and blood-pools, and talk gore over meals. The non-fighting element consists chiefly of theological and law students, and of foreigners having a prejudice against duelling ; and among the *Verbindungen* formed of these ('Club,' 'Coterie,' 'League,' are only approximate translations of a *Verbindung*) the 'W——' is one. Not only may its members not fight, but they may also not over-drink, nor go in for excess of any kind. It was to this *Verbindung* that my friend, a law student, belonged. In almost every case all students belonging to a corps or *Verbindung* wear peaked caps, with a narrow ribbon of distinctive colours round the edge, and a ribbon, perhaps an inch wide, across the chest. They also wear fobs, which are the atrophied straps used in former days to carry a sword.

"Passing through a light gateway, we went up a short path in the garden, and came upon a long table under the trees, lighted by two lamps. About twenty students were ending a song with three loud 'Hochs!' accompanied by the banging of glasses on the table. The number of the next song was being named, when my friend called for silence, and said in a loud, formal voice, 'May I introduce my friend?' and he mentioned my name. Immediately all the students rose and removed their caps. Having no cap, I made my best bow, and was placed next to my friend, opposite the chairman, whom I later learnt to call the 'Third President.' I was given a book of the songs and a big glass of beer.

"During the next two songs, and the intermediate pause, I had time to look round. Everything belonging to the *Verbindung* had the distinctive colours; the tobacco-boxes were decorated with bands of black, white, and gold; the edges of the book of songs (*Kommersbuch*) were similarly coloured; so were the cords decorating the long pipes; and the arms of the *Verbindung* emblazoned on the tankards were in the same colours.

"Members of a corps or *Verbindung* are divided into three classes:—

"(1) *Füchse*, who are students who are in their first year, and correspond to the 'Fresher' of Oxford and Cambridge. They wear ordinary clothes.

"(2) *Burschen*, who have been in the university longer than the *Füchse*, wear green jackets with semi-military cord ornamentation.

"(3) Lastly are the *Philisten* or 'Old Boys,' none of whom was present when I was there.

"There was a surprising difference in appearance among the students—small and big, stolid and quick, fat and thin; and this was accentuated because they were quite new types to me. But all had a natural courtesy and good fellowship which were delightful.

"The thing which interested me most, I think, was my companion's cap; he had a large fox tail reaching from the peak, over the crown, and down his back—he was *Fuchs-Major*. This most important person, ranking as Second President, is a *Bursch*, who has a complete knowledge of the very complicated etiquette of the *Verbindungen*, and is elected to teach the *Füchse* what to do under various conditions and circumstances. He instructs them in the various kinds of toasts and their answers; how to toast when one's beer has 'a head' on it, and when not; on which side

to pass another *Fuchs* who is walking with a lady; he must know and instantly recognise the armorial bearings and monograms of the twenty-three universities, technical institutes, and high schools, and very many other details contained in a special book.

"The First President, *Fuchs-Major*, and Third President are 'fagged' for by the *Leibfuchs*, who brings beer and holds matches to four-foot pipes when required. He is the chief of the *Füchse*.

"Germany, before the Franco-Prussian war, was spoken of as 'a land of thinkers and poets.' If we follow the German students' song-book of to-day, one is induced to add, 'and of musicians.' The true German songs are simple in word and note, but always tuneful, dignified, and sincere, be they about student life, the 'Vaterland,' or love—for the German student must have a girl to sing about.

"After ten o'clock the students may not sing out of doors, as the inhabitants of the neighbourhood wish to retire for the night, so we went to a little house in the garden—each man carrying his beer, book, and chair—and entered a largish room, with a smoke-blacked ceiling. While the others were settling down, my friend took me round the room. He showed me portraits of present and past students in uniform

and in mufti ; armorial bearings of universities, corps, and *Verbindungen ;* he pointed out two framed and cherished telegrams, one from the Kaiser and the other from the Grossherzog von Mecklenburg. There was a large presentation cup in thick pewter, heavily embossed with armorial bearings ; from the ceiling hung a large silver-mounted horn ; and in the corner stood a cask of beer.

"In taking my place, I found I was again next to my friend, who, in turn, was on the right of the Third President. Opposite him was the First President, who had very little to do officially, only acknowledging toasts referring to the *Verbindung* as a whole.

"'*Sile-e-entium !*' shouted the Third President. Then he called out the number of the song in a tone of military command, and at a signal all began to sing in loud, excellent voices ; they were accompanied by a student at the piano. Some songs required the accompaniment to be a duet. At a pause in the song, and also between the songs, toasts were continually called, and were immediately answered by a shout of '*Prosit !*' or '*Kneips !*' with a simultaneous removal of the cap. 'Robin Adair' and 'Long, Long Ago !' were sung in German, and the air of 'God save the King !' was given with other

words. At the end of each song is a shout of '*Ein Smollis Ihr Bruder: Fiducit!*'

"Then picture post-cards came round, with illustrations of the garden and club-room; and being a guest, I was made free of the stamp-box. Later in the evening some one accidentally spilled some beer on my cards, which gave me the right of claiming others, but it was not necessary. After I had written two, the *Fuchs-Major* offered to append his name (this is always a courtesy), and got the Third President to add his. Then a student, Herr F——, came up, removed his cap, bowed, and asked whether I would allow him the honour of adding his name to my cards. '*Mit Vergnügen!*' ('With pleasure!') said I, with a larger amount of sincerity than words. His signature was interesting, as was that of every one, for after his name he drew a monogram of the initials, 'W. V. C. F.' ('*W—— Vivat Crescat Floreat!*'). All the W's have the same letters, but different design of monogram; and a man who has been to, say, two universities bears the monogram of his old university before his name, and that of his present university after. If a student is a First President, *Fuchs-Major*, or Third President, he puts one, two, or three crosses in brackets after the university monogram.

"'*Sile-e-entium!*' And the Third President made a very graceful speech in proposing my health, which occupied several minutes. To signify special approval, the students performed the 'Salamander.'

"This is done as follows. The Third President shouts, '*Ad exercitum Salamandris: estisne preparati?*' The students give an answering shout of '*Sumus!*' The Third President then calls out, '*Silentium, Salamander incipit!*' Then during '*Eins! Zwei!*' glasses are rubbed on the table with a circular motion; on '*Drei!*' drinking begins; '*Eins!*' drinking stops; '*Zwei!*' make ready and aim; '*Drei!*' glasses come with one big bang on the table. During '*Eins! Zwei! Drei!*' loud rumbling of the glasses on the table. '*Eins! Zwei! Drei!*' tremendous bang on '*Drei!*' Then shout of '*Salamander ex!*'

"Afterwards, came more talking, followed by an unaccompanied quartette, excellently given. Soon after came a call of silence for—me! I replied to the toast of my health in English, as my German was only of fifteen days' growth. I was perfectly understood, as all German students understand and read English, though they do not usually speak it. Again I was honoured by the 'Salamander.'

"When eleven o'clock had passed, the proceedings became 'unofficial'; less traditional songs were given, each with its accompaniment of loud yelps, swishes, and terrific bangs of fists on the table, which sent one or two tankards on to the floor each time.

"By careful prompting and rehearsal of words with the *Fuchs-Major*, I was able to drink to the health of the Third President—'*Ich erlaube mir Ihnen etwas aufspezielle zu bekommen*' ('I beg to drink to you in special greeting'); and later to the First President, in the same form. The courtesy was returned, drawing from me a shout of '*Prosit!*' now spoken glibly from continual use. 'Oh, the Pleasure! oh, the Pleasure! oh, the Pleasure in the Love of the Priest's Daughter; the Splendid, Splendid, Splendid Daughter of the Priest,' was given in German, English, Hebrew, French, Latin, and Greek. Many students came up during the evening to the chair next to me, and with the help of a little English, more German, and still more French, conversation was copious, if halting.

"Then a student—my *Fuchs-Major*—buzzed like a fly, following the imaginary insect about the room, and missing it several times. At last, slamming down the lid of a student's

tankard, half-full of beer, he caught the insect. To make quite sure it would not worry any one any more, he drank off the beer at a draught, and so settled the fly.

"About this time the big horn was taken down, cleaned, and filled with beer, and was handed to the Third President, who drank to a student, who drank to some other student, in each case repeating the formula, '*Herr* ——, *nachwärts! Herr* ——, *vorwärts!*' each name being accompanied by a slight bow. This horn is a surprise to the uninitiated. At the same moment that the beer reaches the mouth, it flows out of the corners; even the younger students were no experts.

"While the horn was going round, the *Fuchs-Major* said to me, 'You who come here for one evening, like this, can have no knowledge of what a *Verbindung* really means. All the men you see here this evening are bound to one another by an affection almost brotherly. Every one has his faults and troubles, and with us we can always rely on the greatest sympathy and help from one another. When we have passed our exams. and leave the university to go into the world, it causes the greatest pain. Look here!' and he indicated a rough block of black stone supported against the

wall. It was polished on one side, and bore the words, '*Bemooster Burschen zieh' ich aus; Adé!*' ('White-headed Bursche, I hasten you away; adieu!').

"'When a student leaves the university he smashes his tankard against that stone at the end of a song, of which the first words are those on the stone; it is the symbol of the end of his student life, and is a most thrilling and painful custom, and one almost feels inclined sometimes to weep!'

"'*Sile-e-entium!*' The Third President pointed out that it was now a few minutes past twelve, and that it was Herr G——'s birthday, and went on to make a short, excellent speech. This was supported by the 'Salamander,' which was repeated after the reply from the student, who was now twenty-one years old. He then had the privilege of holding the big drinking-horn, standing, while a song was sung, the number of which he himself had called.

"When this was finished, two students left the table; one impersonated a girl, the other her lover; the only word the latter was allowed to use was 'Laura.' With this one word, intonation, and action were very cleverly indicated the wooing, refusal, and subsequent death of the pair.

"More songs and talk carried us on to 2.15, when it was time to *austrinken*. All stood up and clinked glasses in time to a song, and at stated intervals a student drained his glass at a draught and held it upside down over the table. Those students clinking with the inverted glasses showed great skill and knack in sending splinters of glass flying, and of knocking out bottoms."

["Ach! what a waste!" interrupted Herr Josef Blum, shaking his head sadly, "that breaking of glasses! *I never* would."

I paused and smiled. He took off his spectacles and wiped them before he readjusted them to look at me. Aunt Prue nodded for me to continue.]

"It was 2.30 when we broke up, and dawn was just beginning to show. Two students saw me home (though it was not necessary), and on the doorstep one gravely told me he had the key of the boat-house—would I go rowing with him?

"Throughout the whole evening I was very greatly struck by the high tone preserved. The whole proceedings were carried out with the greatest jollity and freedom; but the room might just as well have been a drawing-room

as a room in a beer-house. Each student had the instincts of 'a splendid gentleman.' The Germans are accused of being sentimental, but among the students, at any rate, this is no fault. In England we make fast and life-long friends at our universities and colleges, and these friendships mean an enormous amount to us, but I do not think we possess to nearly so great a degree as the German students that manly sentimentality which binds the students so closely together, which makes them a factor in society, and which makes the nation so homogeneous. There!

"I trust you are well, and will write soon again.—Your very affectionate son."

My audience thanked me. Aunt Prue's enthusiasm about "Dearie's boy" waxed strong, and the old man, who had listened sympathetically throughout, said quietly, "A bright lad; he makes me remember my college days."

My visit was nearing its end. Six months had actually gone, and my son's homecoming called for my return. It was the last time I accompanied my old friend back from his twopenny shave with Spanish conversation, and we had just arrived on the threshold of his villa when we were suddenly confronted by a

middle-aged, shabby-looking woman. He was too short-sighted to notice what she was; he only heard the words uttered in German:

"I'm in want of money. Don't be hard-hearted. In the dear God's name have pity on a poor woman who—" She got no further.

Herr Josef Blum became livid with anger.

"A beggar!" he cried; "it's a beggar. A Ger-German beg-gar!" he stammered. He was trembling all over, speechless with indignation. He motioned her away with his trembling fore-finger, and, as she persisted and tried to clutch his coat, he started back, drew me through the open door, and flung it to with a bang. His breath came short as he stood and gasped for a moment, and then laboriously mounted the stairs, still quivering on my arm; but he bowed to me with his usual courtesy, and pressed my hand when I left him.

I was glad for once to be rid of him, so dreadful was the exhibition. I ran and told Aunt Prue. She said that on the rare occasions when these little *contretemps* could not be avoided, he was always agitated and upset, as I had seen him at the appeal of the hollow-eyed woman.

At last, when the final touch was being given to my packing, I went to Herr Blum's room to say good-bye. I had forgiven him the hateful

scene of the day before, he had looked so sad and wretched.

"I'm so grieved you can't stay," he said simply.

Heretofore my tap at his study door had always been sure of an eager response, and now the same bright smile that had always welcomed me made me unhappy as it faded away and turned to pain.

"See here," he added, with feverish eagerness. He showed me his books with pride, and searching among them he took down a dictionary, and inscribed my name in it with much ceremony.

"You are kind, but I really don't wish to deprive you of it," I remarked, disliking the idea of accepting anything from him.

"But I got it second-hand," he hastened to assure me, "so it only cost one mark. And I want you to have it as a souvenir, for I think you are the only friend I have who really cares a little bit for me for myself."

Poor pathetic soul! He was so pleased when I told him I would treasure it that he joyously babbled on.

"All these manuscript books you see here, and all my charades, I'm going to leave to the library of my last hospital."

"Your last hospital!"

"Yes; the one to be built in my natal place. The one near here and the others do much good, but this is to be my pet scheme of all."

"But—oh, Herr Blum! you never told me—I——"

"Ach! Told? No, I never told any one," he replied. And added earnestly, "You mustn't tell—I forgot myself; it is my amusement to remain anonymous till I die. It is the condition of every gift I make."

My heart sank when I had to say good-bye and saw my old friend's wistful look—that look which comes to the eyes of old folk when the time to part has come. It had come, and was not without pain for us both. "God bless you!" he said. And I knew I should never see again the piteous, bent figure that appealed so strongly to my sympathy.

Two days after my return home my son was with me to spend his vacation, and we celebrated the event with a cosy little supper, together with Mr. Ryan, Dulcie, her great friend Alma Dryden, Charlie Lane, and Harry Wallace —the Wallace of yore, grown into a "fascinating young man," as we women would call him, just as he promised to be, with the same lightheartedness and the same shallowness of character.

CHAPTER VII

MY SON'S FLIRTATIONS

THE same little party often met together of an evening during the vacation for music and merriment. Frequently little theatre and supper parties were made up, when Mr. Ryan would pioneer us all, his great joke being to include me among the young ones "until you can show some grey hairs," he argued. I must own that I felt young on those little jaunts; and when I responded to my big son's call of "Mater!" strangers would look surprised and whisper curiously. It amused our little circle, and I could only pretend to look unconcerned; I suppose, after all, I am not the only woman of uncertain years who has felt pleasure in being told she is a living optical illusion.

On these occasions Alma was the gayest of us all, flirting with Harry Wallace, trying to interest Charlie, teasing my son, and then perhaps, all of a sudden, devoting herself entirely to Dulcie and me in the discussion of dress and

femininities, and deaf to everything else. Excitement flushed her olive complexion, brightened her roguish black eyes, and brought out the dimples near her rather wide mouth. She was a striking-looking girl of middle height and muscular build. When Dulcie was next to her, it seemed to me that her quiet charm and fair colouring were heightened by contrast with her friend, and she looked like a tall, graceful lily beside a beautiful poppy. Alma was generally surrounded by men, and when I watched her busily laying out her nets of fascination, I sometimes wondered whether the right man would be caught in their mesh. She was not happy at home, so Dulcie told me ; her father thought of nothing but money-grubbing in the city, and her mother showed her little sympathy. Mother and daughter lived together with all the goodwill of friendship and something of ceremony, but of confidence of an intimate nature there was none. Mrs. Dryden preferred her three sons to her one daughter. Alma divided the impulsive love of her warm nature between those three brothers, who were indifferent, and her friends ; Dulcie and I had a large share of it, though not much of her confidence ; she was generally reticent in what concerned her affairs.

My Son and I

One evening in my drawing-room, where we had all gathered after an informal little dinner, my son had just left the piano after singing student songs with Charlie as chorus, when Alma sat down next to where I was embroidering, and raised up her voice in lamentation because her "people" were so keen on forcing a chaperon upon her at every opportunity. "I can't go anywhere except here," she complained, "without being dogged by a chaperon, a brother, or an aunt, or a maid, or some other incubus. In this age the chaperon ought to be extinct—like the dodo. I'm not the only one to suffer loss of liberty and independence. Isn't it a shame? Dulcie isn't so rigidly brought up, and we are just the same age. Don't you think it very old-fashioned? Please do tell Mamma you think so."

"I think it ought to depend on the girl, and it ought not to be necessary."

"Well, then, *I* certainly don't require a chaperon!"

"Oh, yes, you do!" came as a chorus from the three young men. I fancy they thought it would flatter her, or they may have been paying off old scores; they meant no harm. However, Alma was hurt and "wouldn't play"; neither music nor games would tempt her,

THE PENITENT TRIO

although the penitent trio knelt down in front of her and vowed they would form her escort in future and no other chaperon would be necessary ; but she wouldn't even smile.

"Forgive them quick," I urged, "and we'll have an impromptu dance." Mr. Ryan immediately got out the dance music, and peace was restored. I noticed that my son and Harry Wallace at once presented themselves as partners to Alma, and that she demurred for a moment, glancing towards Charlie, who had come to turn over the leaves of my music. She danced with my son, and Dulcie danced with Wallace, and then Charlie suggested himself as my partner, which Mr. Ryan clinched by bringing forward the pianola and managing it himself. So we twirled until we were all breathless, and then as the young people did not seem as harmoniously inclined towards one another as usual, the little festivity broke up rather early. Nevertheless there were many other pleasant meetings before the wrench came again and my son left with Charlie for another year at Rostock.

I was anxious about the stiff exam. he would have to pass, and I was not altogether easy enough in my mind when his letters began to come less frequently and to lack their usual

freshness. I wrote to Charlie in the hope of gleaning more definite news, and I took the opportunity of inviting him to be our guest over the next vacation when at last it should come. He accepted with evident pleasure, and replied that my son was working particularly hard, with every chance of success, and that they were both quite well.

Mr. Ryan thought that I was unnecessarily anxious; but that didn't mend matters for a long time, until at last a telegram brought the good tidings, "Exam. success." Pleased and proud as I was, the uncomfortable feeling his letters aroused was not allayed; it seemed to me that he was outgrowing our old confidence; that my apron-strings were entirely worn out and not a strand of them was left hanging.

Just before my son's return home Mr. Ryan paid me a visit one morning. I wondered what could have happened, as it was his busiest time. "I'm glad to find you at home; I've come to consult you," he explained. "Dulcie has just received an offer of marriage."

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "This is a great surprise —of course it oughtn't to be; it is not the first offer. But she never told me—I'm quite— Who is it?"

"She herself is quite surprised. I've just told her about it. It is young Harry Wallace."

"Dear me! Tell me, what does she think of it?"

"She doesn't think of it."

"Quite right!" I blurted out, greatly relieved.

"But why, my dear friend? I think she is very foolish not at least to think it over. It is an excellent match from a pecuniary point of view, and it is a good family too. I thought that you would be of the same opinion, and perhaps talk it over with her."

"What reason does she give?"

"That she doesn't care for him. But don't you think she might?"

"No," I replied with conviction. "If she said that, let the matter rest, and let him know her decision."

"Willingly," he replied, seemingly more than satisfied. "She is far too young, and I can't spare her; only I thought it my duty to sink my own feelings. Suitors are the terror of my life."

And he went away quite happy.

Why was Dulcie refusing her suitors? I pondered over the fact until it made me quite restless. Why, too, hadn't she confided in me as usual? I felt more anxious about the

matter than I cared to admit, even to myself. When I glanced at the clock it was a quarter past eleven. I had been so absorbed in my thoughts I had not heard it strike the hour, and Dulcie was coming to take me for a walk. I met her coming up the stairs.

"Not ready?" she said gaily, "and I a quarter of an hour late — it saves me an apology."

"Your father has been here, and then I forgot all about the time. Come up to my room, dear, and help me."

She was looking so sweet and pretty in her tailor-made costume which showed to advantage her tall, graceful figure, and the simple straw hat coquettishly placed on her golden hair became her to perfection. She helped me on with my jacket.

"Yes, your father was here," I repeated.

"He told me he would like to consult you."

"You had no objection?"

"Of course not."

"Oh, Dulcie! why didn't you consult me yourself?" She handed me silently the gloves I had put out. "Sit down whilst I wrestle with these new gloves. Did you think I would disapprove your decision?"

"No. Do you disapprove?"

"I certainly don't think you could be happy with such an airy-charactered man as Harry Wallace. I hope you will marry some one more suited to take care of you."

"I'm not at all sure of marrying any one. I'm quite happy with father. No one could love me or sacrifice himself for me more than he does."

"But if a young man whom you could care for did love you very dearly, you would marry him, surely, Dulcie?"

"I don't think that is at all likely."

"Why?" I asked as I picked up the glove-stretcher I had dropped in my surprise.

"Because—" She hesitated.

"Yes?"

"Because I—" she continued slowly whilst her faint colour turned deep and overspread her ears—"might love him and he—doesn't love me!"

"*Doesn't!* Who?" I asked with sudden intent, and I noticed that I had thrown her into a state of confusion. I felt I must press my point, were it only for my own selfish peace of mind. "*Do* tell me," I coaxed; "you always used to tell me everything." I was standing before her; she bent her head and murmured:

"Don't ask me—I can't." Then she looked up and rose, saying, "You are ready. Let us go."

"Tell me, dear, is there really some one?"

"Please——"

"Dulcie! May I guess?"

"Oh no, no!"

"Let me whisper."

Instinctively she bent down. I whispered—only two words—then looked into her face, which had grown pale.

She nodded. And the next moment we were in one another's embrace.

"Come! I'm ready now!" I said, half laughing and half crying as I readjusted my hat before the glass, and feeling as though a great burden had been lifted from me.

It was tacitly treated as a secret confidence not to be referred to again, but we felt more than ever drawn towards one another, and though we talked on trivial matters we enjoyed our walk more than any other; not only because we were happy together, but because we understood one another so well.

I became more than usually cheerful. A few days afterwards my son and Charlie came back from Germany, and late one evening he came into my boudoir, where I was writing.

After a moment I laid my pen down. "Yes? What is it, dear?"

He handed me a manuscript book, and said:

"Would you like to read some silly rot, young Mater? These are my 'innards'!"

"Your *what?*"

"The outpourings of my inmost soul—you know, Mater—my Diary. It's a nuisance to keep up, and—I don't quite—anyhow, there it is; so you can put it in the fire afterwards."

"Wouldn't that be a pity?" I asked. "Some day you might find it useful to refer to." And I took it from him.

"Couldn't possibly be of any use to any one," he retorted.

"It may be of great use to *me*."

"For scribbling on the clean sides of?—Domestic Economy!"

"Oh dear, no!" I hesitated. "Perhaps——"

"Well?"

"Perhaps this Diary may teach me what I haven't fathomed before," I quietly remarked, looking up at him with a smile.

My son emitted a sort of nervous chuckle, looked undecidedly at the packet I held so tightly—then he bent down and kissed me, offered a remark on looks and late hours, then bade me good-night.

I wrote no more that evening. I lost no time in going to my room, and quickly began to read what had long roused my maternal curiosity ; for I felt there was something in it of very particular interest. I opened the book, leant back in my chair, and this is what I read :—

"*May* 1.—Went to the music hall with Charlie and had a ripping supper at the jolly little Prinz Restaurant which Zimmermann, one of the fellows, had recommended. I have come to the conclusion after several months that life in Germany is more pleasant than the language ; at the same time I'd rather dissect a frog before lunch than watch a German cabman eating.

"*May* 8.—Am working awfully hard for my exam., swotting for dear life. I find the more I know, the less I know I know: it's like the information on a British Museum Reader's Ticket in comparison with the contents of the Library. Charlie is a real good chum—but he's apt to fuss around rather. Wish he'd get his mind more on his own work and less on mine.

"*May* 9.—Glorious evening at the theatre with Oskar Wolff. These German students can put

on a lot of side, and he is a 'dasher'—dashes and mashes all over the place. I think he finds me useful as a peg to hang his English on. The best thing about Oskar is his cousin, Klärchen Wolff. She's *echt Deutsch*, German of the Gerwomen — fair crimpy locks, blue eyes, dimples and all. I rather like Klärchen; she's great fun.

"*May* 14.—Fräulein Klärchen is a ripper. I took her for a bicycle-ride yesterday. I collided with somebody, but the dingy-looking German Johnnie needn't have interviewed me in such unparliamentary language. Had I been alone, I should have tried some such repartee as 'blue-nosed maggot,' as being appropriate, if my German could have come up to the scratch. They hate that sort of thing here. Hans Ulmann was quite annoyed last Monday when young Fritz Stöcker called him a 'bilious earwig.' They exchanged cards over it. I wish *mein Fräulein* would talk more, but the outing evidently pleased her if I might judge by her smiles. I wish to-day could be yesterday again; however, she has promised me five dances next Thursday evening. Steady—I must keep a calm mind with the exam. coming on.

"*May* 18.—All very well to say German beer

is so mild and doesn't get into one's head—I know the third lot got into mine last night. We were at a *Biergarten*, Oskar and I. Good job I went silent instead of talkative. . . . Oskar has just been here. He tells me, to my astonishment, that last night, a young officer, who sat near us, politely asked me the time, and that instead of replying I looked him up and down, *ausserordentlich grob* (most ill-mannered), at which some ladies laughed. *Donnerwetter!* He says it's a question of a duel. I told Oskar it wasn't true and not my way, but he says he saw it all himself. I don't care; I'm by no means a novice with a sword, and as I mustn't give the baby *Feldmarschall* a British one in the eye, he shall have a slash for his cheek in his own graceful style. He might have made sure first that the insult was intended. Under the circumstances, it wouldn't have hurt my dignity to explain. Now, I don't intend to.

"*May* 19.—Have been practising all the morning with Charlie mimic warfare with cold steel. Found I was more out of practice than I could have thought possible. Charlie might have murdered me over and over again. He wasn't a bit elated and couldn't have looked glummer had it come off each time. He remarked that I was getting pompous—I, of all people! He's

presuming ; I shall have to sit on Charlie. At the *Herr Doktor's* open-air ball to-night I made the most of my five dances with Klärchen. We sat them out, the whole five of them, under trees where we could talk—at least, where I could talk. I wish she weren't quite so quiet and would offer remarks more frequently. It's unfeminine—uncanny. Her blue eyes are like a child's, and so is her mind, I fancy. She gave me her small lace handkerchief as a token of esteem. Next time we meet she is going to wear the flowers I shall send her. I stupidly let out I'm going to fight a duel—women like that sort of thing, and I noticed her look of pride. I told her I wished it was in her cause, and she threw up her eyes, in which the tears floated, and exclaimed, with an upward toss of her little head : '*Ach wie reizend! Dass ist ja schön!!*' or something of the sort. Feel like a toreador.

"*May* 21.—Just like that ass of a Charlie—been and spoilt the whole show. Actually took upon himself to go and explain the insult was an error and that I had owned the beer got into my head and that I apologised! Apologised!! He 'declined to argue' when I explained the Mater couldn't possibly object as she is in ignorance of the whole affair. Shall

keep my own counsel in future. Beastly mean trick—an unfriendly act, I call it.

"*May* 22.—Klärchen made a sickening fuss at my being safe and well; then when I was forced to confess there had been no question of glory, she didn't say much, but looked heaps. She grows unattractive, and her simpering ways begin to bore me. Fickle woman! Fickler man!

"*June* 1.—Oskar has been good enough to arrange that his cousin and I should not meet again, which suits her, and suits me, and suits him; for I believe he is idiot enough to have become captivated by so much sweet innocence after—well, after his other experiences. She will keep a little charm I gave her in token of some happy hours, and begs I will keep her lace handkerchief. I have promised to do so, but I mustn't leave it about at home or it might create a scare, for I'm always in a state of being tidied up there—here I can be delightfully loose and careless.

[So *that* was the handkerchief which had puzzled me! My son must have put it by mistake with the new lace-trimmed ones he brought me as a present. I had intended producing it for elucidation; now, I decided not to.]

"*June* 7.—That little German doll is quite a load off my mind, and I feel free as air. . . .

"*June* 8.—Phew! Brain-fag isn't in it! Believe I shall pull through it all right, but Charlie isn't hopeful about his own work, although he plods along like blazes. My exam. is the day after to-morrow. So yesterday, according to the custom of this country, I hired an imposing two-horsed many-windowed equipage (the Englishman's technical term for this coach is 'the Crystal Palace'), donned evening dress at 11 A.M., and drove off to leave my visiting card on the *drei Herren Professoren*. The gallant steeds looked rather woebegone, no doubt to match my feelings, for, with all the glass windows of my greenhouse round me, I felt a cross between the Lord Mayor, Cinderella, and a silly ass, as I sat huddled up in one corner in solitary glory.

"*June* 10.—This morning I was again in evening dress; Charlie wished me luck, and I went to the university for the eventful exam. Yawned a lot on my way; nervousness, I suppose. The three Johnnies—I suppose I ought to say *Hänschens*—whom I had honoured with my card, sat at one side of the table (no one would have imagined from their manner that we were on visiting terms), whilst, with a queer sensation in

my knees and waistband, I took up a position on the other. Then I warmed up nicely to the work. One professor jawed questions at me in German for half-an-hour, and I rattled off the answers. When a question stumped me, I pretended I had to wrestle with the language, and so gained time to ruminate. Same with Mr. Professor Doctor No. 2 ; and rather a longer time on my special subject, chemistry, with No. 3. Then I withdrew, feeling rather hot and empty—as if I had left all my learning behind in their heads. I certainly had given them a lot of information. After a short time of waiting I was called in by the official, ludicrously reminding me of the game of proverbs of my youth. The verdict was *insigni cum laude*, and my mind flew to the little Mater. The gentlemen were congratulating me, so I bowed and beamed. I have no recollection of walking out of the university, but I found myself in the streets whistling just in front of the telegraph office, which I entered. So that's all right.

"*June* 12.—Her name is Ella Rosenkranz—the most beautiful actress I've ever seen. Absolutely fascinating. We were introduced at a supper-party ; and I admit, without beating about the (mistletoe) bush, I fell headlong in love with her, and that she should notice me

and care to leave the other fellows to talk to me in her pretty playful way was more than bliss. Her performance was irresistible, and her charm of person, manner, and method of acting unequalled by any actress on any stage. Yes, I'm in love with her—perhaps more than common sense allows. Well—well—well—Who knows? Is common sense the best sense of all?

"*June* 16.—I'm hard hit this time. Last night I made up a supper-party for Ella the Divine, and she was more delightful than ever. Afterwards, sat up till dawn writing verses to her—awful rubbish, I suppose, but hope she may read them and pity me. She's sure to—if only because of my poetry.

"*June* 18.—Last night Charlie was so sympathetic that, in a burst, I told him who my 'lady love' is. I was surprised there was no chaff, but, I fancy, some silent amusement. Why?

"*June* 25.—I don't feel myself lately, which makes me unequal to writing to the Mater. She might see somehow that everything is not quite normal. Charlie says I'm making a fool of myself. Why do we all say that of one another when we're in love?

"*July* 1.—Don't know what I should do without Charlie. He never seems to have any

troubles. There are not many days when *I* feel inclined to whistle. Am getting awfully short of cash. The beautiful Ella is fearfully extravagant. I've countermanded new rig-out.

"*July* 10.—The Mater writes she is anxious for news. I must send her a rollicking letter, if I can—and quickly, as Ella wants to be taken for a moonlight drive, and she doesn't like to be kept waiting, especially as it is a rehearsal for a longer jaunt we are to take together. She has promised to accompany me to Berlin. I count the days till then ; there are only four more of them, then there will be three, two, to-morrow, to-day—now ! She's the most lovable, exquisite—I haven't time to finish.

"*July* 13.—The whole world seems against me. I wish I were out of it. Last night at the club—(perhaps when I have written it all down my mind will be eased a bit, and I shan't feel so acutely this sickening sense of misery)—last night at the club (I had looked in for a moment on my way to the house—her house) the fellows were singing, and drinking, and larking as usual ; I stood at the door, and, as no one had seen me, I was hesitating whether to show myself for fear of being detained, when Charlie suddenly shouted out (the words still keep buzzing in my ears) : 'Listen, boys,

I've found out something. The fair bewitcher, Fräulein Ella Rosenkranz, is married ; her husband is alive, and will be kicking somebody soon ! She has simply been fooling around—somebody ! She's been studying him for her new part in *Die Engländerin !'* Choking with indignation, I rushed forward in a passion. I told him he lied. He rose to reply, when I raised my fist and knocked him down. I saw the blow had stunned him, but I didn't wait, I tore away to find Ella. She was at home, and with her was a gentleman in uniform—her husband, she said, suddenly home on sick leave. It is true. This Ella whom I loved, and to whom I was so deeply devoted—married! Bitter reproaches rose to my lips. She laughed carelessly at my surprise—treated me with maddening disdain. Her husband uttered the German word 'impertinent,' and showed me the door. No English woman could be so false.

"*July* 14.—Charlie and I have been talking it all over. He came into my room, for he guessed I was in much trouble. This ink isn't black enough to express my sorrow for my act. I don't deserve his goodness. He was quite chummy and forgiving in spite of my abominable behaviour. It seems he had his suspicions about her from something he had heard, and

had made it his business to get at the truth. And from what I got out of him, I have a suspicion that he had something to do with the husband's return. He intended breaking it to me. He was awfully nice as usual, and I apologised abjectly. He laughed it off, as if I had been quite 'correct.' He's got an awful bump on his forehead, which fills me with remorse. [Poor loyal Charlie!] There's no doubt he's saved me from a public scandal. I'm jolly miserable altogether.

"*July* 17.—Very slack. I shall be glad to get back to dear old England and the little Mater. The students are making Charlie's life a hell because he wouldn't make that lump on his forehead a matter for a duel. Good old Charlie! Had I followed his advice he would have got me sooner out of that affair, as he has got me out of others. He seems to take it terribly to heart himself—I don't know why he should. I'm going to give up this Diary and turn over a new leaf—unwritten on. Women are too much of a mystery to be reduced to a chemical equation. What troubles I have had have been through them, so I shall fight shy of the sex in future.

"*July* 18.—Diary given up.

"Amen and farewell to it and the ladies."

I slept peacefully that night—better than for months past. Charlie had indeed been a firm friend, as he had promised me to be.

And yet, in spite of his diary's end, my son surprised me: not immediately, but soon after. He surprised me very much indeed, for his little flirtations abounded. I always thought he would become a favourite with women, for his considerateness was untainted by effeminacy. When wants are anticipated with kindness and gentleness, and the young man is chivalrous, merry, and sympathetic withal—what more—so far as manner is concerned—could a mother desire or woman ask? But something puzzled me; I couldn't imagine what could have made him do it. This is how I came to know it:

He had looked very anxious during the afternoon and had gazed wistfully at me more than once, which I pretended not to see. I waited.

"Mater," at last he began nervously, "I hope you'll not be very surprised—or, or hurt. I've something important to tell you—I—I—Alma Dryden and I are engaged!"

I felt that I turned very white, and for the moment my heart stopped and my brain thought of nothing—unconsciously absorbed

in the flushed face before me, out of which the colour was slowly fading.

"Is it a joke?" I asked faintly.

He looked at me reproachfully. My heart palpitated and sank.

"I fear—I thought she loved some— I hope you will be happy," I heard my voice saying, and the tones grated strangely. Then I was in my room without quite knowing how I got up there. My soul seemed to gush out in a flood of tears, and I sobbed and sobbed as I had not done since I lost the dear one whose love no other could ever replace.

Later on I was conscious of the well-known tap at the door, and two strong arms were round me. My son sat beside me on the couch, and laid my head gently on his shoulder. I said nothing, but pressed his hand as he assured me he was *so* happy. He then confided to me how it came about *so* suddenly. They had been flirting, and she had told him how miserable she was at home. So he declared that he would take her from it if she would marry him. At first she doubted if he were serious. Then she considered a moment, and her gratitude had made him so *very* happy. He told her I must be made to live with them, and she had not demurred.

My Son sat beside Me on the Couch

A sob that choked me rose to my throat, but I controlled it.

"I'm sure you will like her, Mater. You only want to know her well to understand her good qualities. And isn't she handsome?"

"Yes, very handsome," I answered, now quite calm again. "But you are so young. I thought you would have waited — and marry——"

"Alma wants our engagement to last twelve months," he broke in impetuously.

"What!" My surprise took him aback, I could see.

"Of course," I continued quickly, "she has had many admirers — amongst them even Charlie, so I've heard."

"Only a flirtation," he replied, smiling. "Charlie's such a susceptible chap and flirts with every girl he meets, and yet pretends he is cut out for a bachelor because not one of them cares for him."

"And yet I thought—you won't mind my telling you—I thought those two did care for one another; and so—you—you really have surprised me more than I can tell."

"Wrong for once, then, Mater—I'm the happy man! By Jove!" he added, as he twisted his moustache, "what a funny little

mother-in-law you will make—and as to a grandmother—!" He laughed outright.

I knew he wanted to cheer me, but it was a very doleful smile I gave him, for I doubted greatly Alma Dryden's love for my son, and I felt he would never find happiness or sympathy with her. Besides, I was deeply distressed that he was too blind to see in Dulcie Ryan the sweetest girl of our acquaintance whose modesty had screened the attachment she felt for him, but which my maternal eye had detected with pride and delight.

And now those hopes were gone—his happiness and mine were to be destroyed by this ill-assorted choice.

One afternoon some weeks later my son came into my boudoir and I saw by the lines about his face that some great worry beset him. He told me briefly that he and Alma had just had the last of many quarrels, when—in a fit of temper she admitted that it was Charlie she loved, and, to lure him on, she had engaged herself to my son.

"It's all over, Mater," he exclaimed wearily; "my faith in women is really gone this time." A flutter of triumphant relief shivered through my brain and heart and right arm—a curious sensation that lasted for a second.

He and I talked it over together quietly and solemnly whilst the August twilight gathered and darkened. My intuition told me he was more disappointed in a shattered ideal than cut up at his loss. His sense of chivalry, evidently, had been at the root of the whole affair.

Then Charlie's cheery voice fell on our ears.

"What! All in the dark?"

I turned on the lights.

My son was in no sociable mood and pleaded work upstairs. I felt sad and indignant at the way he had been treated as my eyes followed his tall figure out of the door, and a deep sigh escaped me. Then I turned to his friend.

"Well, Charlie," I said gaily, "when are *you* going to get married?"

"I marry? Perhaps you can tell me that some one cares for me."

"Perhaps I can," I answered.

Whereupon he gave me a rapid curious look that distressed me so much I felt aghast. And he began to stammer something in his old way. I interrupted him quickly. "Surely," I said, vexed, "you have outgrown that foolish boyish craze, and you are not going to inflict upon me the pain of—" I stopped, for he looked abashed, and pressed his lips together.

"And I'm so grateful to you, Charlie, for all

you've done in Germany for my boy," I added gently, "and——"

"What do you know about it?" he asked, surprised.

I took no notice of the interruption—"and I want to see you happy, with interests of your own. That is partly why I wish to tell you that some one does love you very much and has done so for some time. She is a young lady of our acquaintance."

"Then please say no more," he replied firmly; "I don't intend to marry any young lady of our acquaintance."

My son, who had returned for his forgotten pipe, broke in: "Look here, Charlie, it's Alma Dryden—she's chucked me for you!"

"You don't mean that!" exclaimed Charlie, startled. "I—I—am cut out for a bachelor!"

"That's my destiny too," chimed in my son.

What was the use of arguing? I knew better, of course. But it seemed so strange, so tragic to me, that in all his flirtations it never occurred to him to fall in love with the right person.

The next thing he did was to take his B.Sc. with honours, and leave me again for many months in order to do some special work at Bâle, where I was to join him for the summer holidays.

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN I AM NOT THE HEROINE

AUNT PRUE and I were together again; this time she was on a visit to me. Herr Josef Blum had lately died. On his last day he had toiled, for the first time and the last, right to the top of his little hill. And there, on the seat, he was found dead. His straw hat had fallen off, and the noonday sun shone full upon his head and warmed his peaceful features and his clasped hands as though it would warm him back to life.

She told me what every one did not know—that in his hand was found a letter he had received that morning. It was from his sister, informing him that she was in the German hospital near Naples, and reproaching him in bitter terms for scorning her at his door when she came to beg for assistance in her poverty, as was her right, for she could ask no one else to help her and her fatherless children.

The sight of the poor woman in her shabby

mourning flashed back into my brain: it was she. And I could not help wondering whether remorse had killed him.

Soon after came news of his will, upon which so many had built their hopes. It was found to have been drawn up two years before. Herr Josef Blum left the bulk of his great wealth to his sister's children, the rest to his hospitals; and there was a recent codicil to the effect that £30,000 was bequeathed to Aunt Prue "as a token of his appreciation of her kindness and devotion." She was quite overcome at the news, and could only murmur, as she smoothed the wavy hair each side of her forehead, "Oh, my dear, I never knew he had such a thing as a hospital." Tears welled up into my eyes as I replied from my heart, "Poor old Josef Blum!"

"I don't want it—all that money—or any of it," added Aunt Prue, perturbed and tearfully inclined. "The dear, kind friend! I really would rather be at peace without it, and end my days just as I was in Hawthorne Cottage."

"Live again in the old house at Bath," I suggested, "and invite Barbara to live there, too. There's an idea," I cried, delighted at my inspiration. "Barbara won't live at home any longer, and can't be very happy in Austria as

companion to a woman of fashion. Why, she'd jump at the idea."

"Really I should be happier, Dearie, on Rosie's hundred a year in the sunny little cottage than at the great house in Bath with all its sad memories."

"Then it's no use my arguing the point, is it?"

She shook her head with that half-comical, half-rueful sort of expression of hers. "But I know what I should like to do," she added briskly. "I should like to buy Hawthorne Cottage, and let the Lamberts live there free of rent. Perhaps Barbara would come and occupy the other two rooms. I'll write and ask her. She should have allowed us to persuade her to remain with her brother, and not have gone abroad like that."

She did write and make the offer, and what was our surprise to learn that Barbara had just been married to the Austrian lady's middle-aged son, an officer in the army; and her former employer, who gave no promise apparently of proving an ideal mother-in-law, was going to live with them when they returned from their honeymoon!

Our surprise was tempered with a natural annoyance that we of her family had not been

consulted or even apprised of her plans ; and we were not a little hurt, too, especially Aunt Prue, who felt the slight acutely. "I should never have thought it of Barbara. However!" she exclaimed at intervals, and twirled her thumbs first forwards and then backwards, in token of much agitation.

In fact she did not wholly cheer up until she was again installed at Hawthorne Cottage, with her flowers to tend, her laces to iron, and her old protégés to visit ; but she could hardly get over the many gaps that had occurred in their ranks since her long absence. Lambert's mother, too, had died in the interval, so Lambert again lived in the little cottage where she was born, and where she now took care of my aunt, as well as of her aged father.

The legacy was like a white elephant to Aunt Prue, and she complained that she couldn't sleep well for thinking of it. At last she came to a decision. "I'll put it in the bank, Dearie, and try and forget all about it." In which she must have succeeded, for no further reference was made to it. My frequent visits to her were resumed with delight. I often took Dulcie with me, for Aunt Prue was very fond of the sympathetic girl ; and of course no one could help loving Aunt Prue. And we

never went home except loaded with roses or other sweetnesses from the cottage garden.

One day, after one of these happy visits, I found a foreign telegram awaiting me, and my heart sank at sight of it. My son had sent me several post-cards of late saying he had caught a slight chill, but it was nothing; yet this seemed to forbode ill tidings, and I read with dismay:

"Your son suffering pneumonia; progressing; don't come; letter follows.—DR. LUNKER."

A feeling of helpless despair and nausea numbed me, and I don't know how long I sat at the table in my outdoor things, staring at the telegram without seeing it. Why should I not come? Pneumonia? Did he mean that—it was too late? Oh, no; he said "progressing." I felt it was of no use going next door with my sadness and anxiety—there was nothing to do but to await the promised letter, which came at last. The doctor wrote that he had had my son removed from his lodgings to a private hospital quite near his own residence; that at present there was no real danger; and that they both thought I had better not come until later on, as I could be with him but little, and his anxiety at my being so long at a strange hotel

alone would do him no good. A telegram would be sent to me daily, full and detailed.

Oh, those days and nights of anxiety, while my dear one lay invalided in a hospital with all those miles between us! The bulletins varied according to the fluctuations of the fever, and my nerves and spirits fluctuated with them. Many times I was on the eve of starting, and then decided to obey the doctor. Constant postcards, very, very short, still came to me from my son, always cheerful, always hopeful and reassuring. It was not himself he was thinking of. Then they became curiously composed, rambling, ill-spelt, even incoherent. They showed me plainly enough how things were going. I packed up in haste. Mr. Ryan put me in the train, and when I stepped out of it I was at Bâle, and very soon I was at the hotel with Dr. Lunker giving me every detail of the illness. He assured me the fever was practically over; convalescence, I should know, could only be slow.

I had to wait a few days before I was allowed to see him. He was to be told he might expect me, as I preferred to come now than later, as was originally arranged, so that I might sit with him and help to while the time away.

There wasn't a soul I knew in the place; but

the evening after I arrived, just before *table d'hôte*, an English lady, whose beautiful red burnished hair had attracted my silent admiration, introduced herself to me, saying she knew my name, which she had seen in the hotel register. She had known my husband many years ago, she said, and her name was Madame Barthold Delacambre. She was dressed in black, which made her worn, pale face look even paler than it was. Dark rims were round her sad grey eyes ; indeed, the sweetness and sadness of her face, which was still young, had a gaze as haunting as that of Gainsborough's "Perdita." She clearly had a very bad cough, and told me she was travelling for her health—her "health," poor thing!—accompanied by her maid. Her weak condition aroused my sympathy ; and as she took great interest in the phases of my son's illness, my trouble and anxiety were somewhat allayed by her kindly words of encouragement.

When I was expected at the hospital I went there with a beating heart. I knew my boy must be very weak, and that my duty was to be unemotional and altogether sensible. The bump of locality is not one of my most celebrated faculties—as a rule, I find my way best by going in the direction diametrically opposite

to that towards which my instinct leads me. I found the hospital without much difficulty although it was almost next door. The building had a long balcony on to which a number of beds from the ward had been wheeled, their occupants sheltered from the sun by blinds which formed a slanting roof. I had still more difficulty finding the private room indicated to me, and when I opened the door:

"Oh, I beg your pardon," I said in confusion, rapidly retreating on seeing a stranger with a black beard and moustache, lying there in bed, but on the threshold I was stopped by a familiar voice calling out:

"Mater! Stop—hi!"

The next moment the great arms were once again round me, and the silky beard was against my face with a sensation I never had experienced before.

"How could I know you with that on?" I asked, quietly laughing.

"Don't you like it?"

"I must consider," I replied, scanning his face and anxiously noting the hollow eyes and sunken cheeks.

"Fancy the Mater coming here alone! I shall be well quickly now." After a very brief visit I had reluctantly to leave him. "I'm

only glad," he said, retaining my hand in his, "that you've some one at the hotel to talk to, or you'd be very lonely—poor old Mater!" His pleasure at seeing me and the ocular proof that he was on the high-road to recovery cheered me immeasurably; I busied myself shopping for us both—clothing for him, and fal-lals for me.

Then I wrote to Nurse Patrick begging her to come out to me, to help nurse my son when he left the hospital for beyond the hills, where he was to take the sulphur cure. As I had left my maid behind, an unsatisfactory creature, Nurse Patrick would be a welcome recruit.

Fortunately she was able to come to me at once, as her husband was abroad, and she was always free then. He was a king's messenger, and his absences were too frequent and too long to be mutually agreeable; to be a messenger for your king even, it seems, has its drawbacks. I cheered up still more at the sight of her strong personality; she was so robust in health and firm in character that I relied upon her as a mariner relies upon his compass. I had tea brought out on the balcony overhanging the river, and there we sat chatting about my son at one of the small tables while the waters flowed swiftly below, tearing past

madly, as though doomed now and for ever to work out some stern secret destiny that mortals would never fathom. Two daring men in a boat, with evident enjoyment, were steering their small craft down through one of the arches of the bridge, essaying with skill to prevent the relentless waters swinging it round and round out of all control. We watched them breathlessly, pausing in our talk, relieved when they safely gained the bank, only, however, to begin their sport again. Then she told me the news, of which I had heard a private rumour, that Dr. Charleston had received a baronetcy, "richly deserved," as I telegraphed to him. Sir Alan Charleston! I still wondered if ever I should fathom what was in his mind during that drive when I constituted myself Barbara's champion, and laid myself open to dreadful misconstruction.

When I informed my son of his former nurse's arrival, he was highly amused at my having conceived "such a jolly good notion." "And how is she?" he asked, smiling.

"Just the same—doesn't look a day older."

"Do you think Miss Patrick will recognise me?"

"Mrs. Patrick is sure to require a re-introduction."

"You mean *Miss*."

"I don't. She's Mrs. Patrick. She recently married her cousin."

"Good Hevinks!" facetiously remarked my son, and he burst out laughing. "I haven't fallen in love with my nurse this time, Mater," he whispered, as her footstep sounded on the threshold ; she was a raw-boned peasant woman in a plain black dress and short black cape, with a high-cheeked ruddy face under tightly parted hair and a quaint white starched cap.

When Mrs. Patrick saw Madame Delacambre she betrayed her concern at her state of health ; she clearly thought the cough of grave augury, and she told her very plainly that she should seek advice in London, as the foreign doctors were evidently doing her no good.

"I don't much care," answered the invalid wearily, "my life has been too sad for me to want to prolong it." She had let drop a few words to me of her story, mainly to the effect that she had lived most unhappily with her husband, who had been killed in a duel after leading a riotous life. We begged her to come to London, and at last she consented to wait at Bâle, where she had friends, until our return journey to England. My son would then be fit to resume his interrupted work, and she and her

maid Clairette, a quaint and fascinating native of Beauvais—oh, so simple, and oh, so shrewd and clever—would travel back with me and Mrs. Patrick.

It was not a very luxurious place beyond the hills, where the sulphur inhalations had to be taken — a large ramshackle building, like a London crescent and terrace and square in communication, all in one, with clean carpetless rooms and scanty furniture, and a dreadful odour of sulphur rampantly prevalent. Opposite was the *dépendance*, with a long, low ballroom and the servants' quarters, the whole in a condition that suggested that their glory had departed. However, there were compensations in the magnificent grounds traversed by a swiftly flowing river, and in the food, which was *sans reproche* on my son's part, for he is really very particular. The invalids were more or less hypochondriacal, and the whole was not very inspiriting. I don't know what we should have done without the orchestra, which lived on the premises, played vigorously three times daily, and in odd moments did odd jobs, cleaned the windows, and helped carry huge baskets to and from the laundry.

It was while we were here amongst the trees and the birds that we heard of Charlie's

engagement to Alma Dryden, in happy letters from them both. Their marriage was to take place when Charlie was promoted to the more lucrative post of principal chemist promised him in the great dye-works where he was doing well. We were talking of them one hot night, my son and I, sitting together on our balcony. Mrs. Patrick had gone early to bed. He was quite strong again; our stay was at its close, and our parting was to take place on the morrow. The birds were all asleep after their noisy piping and twittering the whole day through, and the sultry air would have been quiet and hushed but for the strains of a dreamy waltz which stole out of the open windows of the *dépendance* opposite. The building was brightly lighted, and gay with flitting figures in evening dress. The sky was black with gathering clouds, which were approaching nearer and nearer; and as my son was saying, a storm would be welcome to clear off the oppression that reigned—one of the big, rattling, showy storms that are so common in Swiss summers. The trees that had been so still suddenly waved their branches, and a breeze like a cool breath passed over the sultry atmosphere. At the same moment the angry-looking clouds were

opened with fitful flashes of fire, thunder boomed and rolled away. We silently watched the storm advancing nearer and nearer, whilst opposite, the music, the laughter, the dancing continued in merriment, and what to us, in the darkness, seemed like a flaunting heedlessness of the grandeur and majesty of the tempest now raging outside. Suddenly the whole heavens seemed to open and vomit fire, and simultaneously there was a thunderclap like an explosion. Involuntarily, I buried my face in my hands. When I looked up, bewildering noises were coming from everywhere, and I saw that the ballroom was on fire. The *dépendance* had been struck by lightning. The shock was terrific. A wild panic ensued, and I saw the couples who had been so lightheartedly dancing rushing from the partially wrecked building, and others being carried out. Some had tripped and fallen, but were dragged up before further accident happened from the wild struggling that was going on to get away into safety. The confusion was indescribable, and I suddenly realised my son was no longer by my side. "Just going to help—stop there, mother. Back soon." I heard it like an echo from far off.

"Come back!" I called. Then in an agony

of fear I screamed "Come back!" again, as I thought in my selfishness, "What are they all to me?—I've only you!" knowing quite well he could not hear me, as I saw him rushing through the torrential rain, to where flames were springing up and sinking again under the downpour of the deluge.

He rejoined me before long where I still sat in a paroxysm of anxious terror. He was very pale, and very grimy and wet, but in high good-humour. No one, he said, had been injured, though there were many "close shaves," but some had sustained hurts and bruises, and several had been brought round from unconsciousness; there was no one left in the building, which had great gaping holes in it, and was uninhabitable. "And I haven't even a scratch to show for having carried several women out," he added jokingly, with an anxious look at me.

"Take off your wet things at once," I urged. I was crying, from tension and fatigue, very weakly.

"I mustn't touch you, in this state," he replied, surveying himself; but he kissed me, and with a reproachful smile told me he was very ashamed of his Mater, who did not play the heroine, but was an arrant little coward

instead of being like a mother of Gracchus junior. I tried to explain that maternal-Gracchism was not to be acquired—at least by me, and that I considered his life was of more importance to me than anybody else's could be to them. And when the fire was out, and all was quiet but for the men who were posted to watch the ruins till the dawn, he wished me good-night at my door ; and though we smiled, truth compels me to admit that we were both heartily ashamed of my son's mother.

We had to be up early next morning in order to catch the express at Bâle. There we met our travelling companion, who was on the lookout for us. I took a hurried farewell of my son ; the station electric-bell, as at all Swiss stations, tolled its usual mournful, gong-like "Don't-go" in its usual mournful minor key, and my interest in life only reawakened at the sight of a stork with his immediate family surveying the landscape from their nest on the turret of a village church.

By the time we four unprotected women arrived in London Mrs. Delacambre had made herself a great favourite with me and Mrs. Patrick. Her suffering and patience and spirit of hopefulness I took as a lesson to myself ; for hitherto my first impulse when in trouble

—that is to say, in trouble of my own—had always been to sit down on the floor and weep. The liking was reciprocated, and I gladly accepted her invitation to call on her at her hotel. The journey had been made in very easy stages for her sake. Nevertheless the fatigue had tried her a good deal, and her weak condition alarmed us not a little. But she herself was not nervous. Nurse Patrick told me with a shake of her head how usual was this buoyant feeling in such cases—a sort of providential and premature uplifting which boded no mortal good.

Then there was some talk about Clairette entering my service as she was not very skilled in nursing. Mrs. Delacambre proposed it as she knew it might prove feasible, and as Clairette fell in with the proposal it was arranged that after seeing her mistress comfortably settled, Clairette should come on to me. Nurse Patrick was to take her place, and it was arranged that a doctor should be consulted at once.

The following afternoon, when I went to the hotel to see my poor friend, I found her lying on the bed in her room where she had remained to rest since her arrival. How very fragile she looked lying there in a white silk tea-gown ; and when the dreadful cough seized

her, the brass bed shook during the paroxysm, and Clairette hasted to soothe her by wiping the cold drops from her brow and revive her by fanning. Dr. Rufford had been telegraphed for to come to the hotel and advise the patient whom he had known from babyhood. He had retired from practice now, and it needed systematic telephoning to trace him to his club, whence he was expected every minute. I was still there when Clairette announced, after a preliminary struggle, "Monsieur le Docteur Rouffe!" Mrs. Delacambre begged I would remain, for she already looked upon me as more than a friend.

A white-haired old gentleman came in, greeted the invalid by patting her on the shoulder, and bowed ceremoniously to me in the background. He wiped his gold-rimmed spectacles with deliberation, put them on, and took stock of the patient.

"My dear child, how you've changed!" he exclaimed, and hastened to add, "but of course it's so very many years since—" He sat down, and talked and soothed, and recalled old times, and was generally cheery; and when he heard her cough, his voice quavered a little as he continued, "I cannot prescribe for you; it's not quite my line. But I will tell you who can—

for your case, quite the first living authority—you must consult Sir Alan Charleston."

"No, no—I won't go and see him," she cried passionately, to our astonishment. Then she added more quietly: "Is there no one else?"

"Why not?" asked Dr. Rufford, taken much aback. He raised his chin and looked downwards through his glasses at his patient. "You really must see him! He's the best man. It's your duty, to yourself, and to your friends, and —um—um—to all of us."

"Oh *do!*" I interrupted; "he *is* so clever, and a dear old friend of mine."

She looked at me in a puzzled, dazed sort of way, and muttered as though she were speaking to herself, "You never told me—but—of course you would know him."

"Why not consult him, my child?" repeated old Dr. Rufford; "there's certainly no one like him for you in your state of health. No one near so clever or experienced, or, indeed, original. That's his strength. Now why not?" She shook her head. "Indeed, you must," he urged; "I insist upon it. We think very highly of him in the profession. I'll go with you as he's a stranger to you; I know him slightly. I shall have to be there, you see—these big consulting physicians always prefer

as much etiquette as possible. Eh? What do you say?"

"I would gladly go with her," I hazarded, "if I can be of the slightest service." She turned her head and smiled gratefully. Dr. Rufford clinched the matter with the remark that he would make the appointment for the following morning if possible. "I will mention," he said, "that you will be accompanied by an old friend of his, and I will let you know the hour. I will be there to give him the family history; but I have actually not seen you since your marriage. You never came to England as your poor mother often did. Ah! that was a sad case!" Not heeding the protest she began to make, the old man again tapped her on the shoulder in a fatherly way, and said:

"Good-bye. I'll get back to my club now. You must take my advice and do what I tell you—which your people, I remember, were not always in the habit of doing, eh? What? Ha, ha, ha! Very opinionated, very opinionated indeed." He took up his hat and went out chuckling, as if he had no thought whatever of the condition of the patient.

She lay quiet for a little time with her eyes closed; when she opened them, it was to take

my hand and beg me to remain longer. "Sir Alan Charleston is old now, isn't he?" she inquired listlessly; "I—met him long ago."

"He doesn't *look* old. He always seems to look the same, year in year out. I think he must be about fifty. No—he must be more than that."

"Married?"

"On the contrary—a bachelor, a confirmed bachelor."

When Clairette entered with the tea I rose to go, for the invalid seemed exhausted. I kissed her, and promised to call in the morning fairly early to see how she was, and to hear about the appointment.

The consultation had been fixed. Sir Alan Charleston's roomful of patients had slowly emptied itself, and still we waited in the depressing chamber disconsolately. It was long past the hour of appointment when through the open door I heard his voice:

"Rogers, take them this and show them in to me at once!" My companion flushed, then the blood left her face.

The automatic butler brought us in a telegram as though it were a missive ordering us to instant execution. It was from Dr. Rufford, explaining to Sir Alan that he had a violent

attack of gout, begging that the interview might proceed without him, and a letter would follow. Mrs. Delacambre rose and passed through the door Rogers held open and into the passage, then she turned and beckoned me to follow her.

When the consulting-room door opened to admit us, Sir Alan Charleston saw before him my friend's tall emaciated figure clad in black, and her gentle face with the sensitive mouth trembling somewhat nervously as she bowed.

He acknowledged her salutation, motioned her to a seat, and smilingly thanked me for my words of congratulation upon his recent "distinction." Then he seated himself in his professional chair and said to her courteously:

"May I have the honour of knowing your name? I only heard of you," he added, with a smile, "as a former patient of Dr. Rufford, who attended your family."

She was looking at him all the time, seemingly trying to trace the boyish features in the now massive face, so handsome still, with its stern lines and its broad forehead with the profusion of grey hair. Then she realised that he had asked her a question, and that he was awaiting her reply.

"My name, did you say? My name is

Mrs. Delacambre. You used to know me as Marcella Ellismere," she added simply.

She noticed, as I did, that he gave an involuntary start but quickly recovered himself. A light broke in upon me. So this was Marcella! I smothered my "Oh!" in my handkerchief. "Forgive me," he was saying. "It is more than —than twenty years ago— I heard you were living abroad; I didn't know—" there was the old sympathetic ring in his voice; she remembered it well, for she looked inclined to cry—"that—that you were ailing like this. Allow me to get you a little sal-volatile." He was on his feet. "Don't move," he said to me.

She pulled herself together. "You are very kind. I assure you I need nothing; I really am much better. I hope I shall not be sent—at least that you will not think it necessary," she added, smiling, "for me to go abroad, for I should like to settle again in London. I am wishful to inquire after our old house—but I fear I am wasting your time."

"My time is entirely at your disposal, Mrs. Delacambre," he said with feeling, "and all you tell me interests me, and I assure you I have—" Her coughing made him stop short in what he was going to say. I detected for a moment a look of horror in his eyes, or was it my fancy?

He was busy now with his stethoscope. What a hurried professional way he had of asking questions, scarcely waiting for a reply before starting a fresh one. Then the questions ceased —he turned slowly to the window, and opened it slightly before resuming his seat.

"Well?" she asked, "I suppose, after all, I must be pretty bad, eh, Sir Alan?"

"You should have come to me before." His features were very grave.

"I didn't want to come even now— Oh! I mean—" she stopped confused.

"Why?" he asked bluntly.

"It killed my poor mother," she said, to turn the conversation.

"So I heard. I saw Mrs. Ellismere the last time she came to London. She came to me. She seemed much altered, I thought. We had a little chat."

"Did you? She didn't tell me."

"She spoke of things concerning you—of you, in fact."

"Of me? What did she say?" asked Marcella, surprised.

"She honoured me with her confidence; I'm not sure I ought to repeat it."

"Surely there can be no harm—now."

"I suppose not," said Sir Alan, hesitating.

The "consultation" was developing into another channel, I felt, and I determined to quit the room at the first opportunity and leave them to their talk, which was not meant for other ears. He seemed to make up his mind and proceeded: "She instinctively knew her state of health, and nothing encouraging that I could say would shake her. Indeed, she seemed more anxious, in the circumstances, to say something that was on her mind than to seek for a recovery which she felt was unattainable. That something she told to me—people will often confide their secrets to doctors and lawyers, you know, so as to have the comfort of feeling that those secrets do not die with them—and it was this—that she suspected that the match she felt she had forced upon you was ill-judged, and that you carried the memory of some one else in your heart, or at least in your memory. I hope I am not indiscreet—that I do not give you pain. I was afraid I did, by your—starting a little. You are the best judge of the truth of her fancy, and I have no right, and no desire, to expect you to comment upon it. Your mother spoke to me as to an old acquaintance—one whom she had once judged with some severity. She seemed relieved that she had spoken, even though it was in a sense without any definite purpose. She

declared that the idea was haunting her, and was worrying her intolerably—intolerably. That's all."

While he was speaking, Marcella had turned her head away and held her handkerchief to her face, but her twitching fingers betrayed her intense emotion. When he stopped, there was silence for a moment. "She never told me!" she said again.

Then Marcella looked calmly and frankly towards him and asked, almost with a smile, "Well, and what's the verdict?"

He made no reply.

"Please don't hesitate to tell me, candidly—I am all alone—and, as my mother seems to have told you, my life has not been a happy one, so that——"

"It should have been happy," he rejoined with some emphasis, then cleared his throat and added in his professional manner, "Allow me, please, to test the lung again."

Silence reigned, broken only by the business-like ticking of the small clock on the desk. Marcella seemed to feel soothed by her thoughts—his gentleness of touch and strong personality aroused in her a feeling of security and rest. Suddenly something like a sigh escaped him. She looked searchingly up into his face. He

was standing erect, and she noticed he was pale and that he was trying ineffectually to smile.

"Old friend," said Marcella, "I think you are sorry for me?"

"I—I——"

"Admit it—do admit it."

"We shall have to take drastic measures—I—" She was watching him; he turned sadly to his desk.

"I *must* know," she exclaimed, rising with sudden energy; "tell me frankly. Is it hopeless?"

"Hopeless? One must never think such dreadful thoughts! We must see—we must see," he answered softly; "there's always hope!"

"Practically hopeless, then?"

They looked into one another's eyes and she read her doom. But it was not only that that she read in those eyes of his and which made her forget everything else as she approached nearer, saying, "And it makes you feel so sorry?"

I rose, unobtrusively, and opening a door which I thought led to the reception-room, shut it quickly and found myself in a small laboratory, with bottle-laden shelves, and sat down in its only chair, close by the sink at the window. At

that moment a bang of the street-door loosened the ill-fitting door I had just shut, and it slowly swung open. Against my will I remained seated, hesitating to draw their attention to myself again, for Sir Alan was making an effort to control himself as he moved towards Marcella.

"Oh, tell me that," she added softly; "for," she continued, in a burst of long pent-up feeling, "I have loved you always!—faithfully!—my mother knew it. I shall be dead soon and that gives me the right to speak. Nothing matters now—nothing!" Sir Alan listened in amazement. Then something more than amazement brightened his eyes as she went on, sadly, for the moment of exaltation had passed. "But—but I oughtn't after all to have told you!—What for?"

"Marcella!" His voice was broken and tears were coursing down his cheeks.

How it was I don't know. I had looked away, but she was in his embrace, her arms were round his neck and her face was radiant with happiness as he kissed her, her lips, her eyes, her hands. "You love me too!" she murmured in happy triumph.

"Oh, Marcella, Marcella! I only realised what I had lost when I heard you were engaged to your cousin, and then it was too late!"

"No, no, Alan, it would not have been too late. My marriage was only a sacrifice—one that proved too heavy a burden. It was a burden I couldn't hide, and it was soon detected. And you loved me then, dear?"

"I loved you then, my poor angel. And it made me a better man. Not that I was a bad one, but I determined to—to do better, to devote myself to my profession; it was through the memory of you that I have never married. Tell me again, dearest, that you love me," he whispered.

"I love you, Alan, very dearly."

He tightened his arms round her, and she silently rested there like a happy child. They were happy at last in that sublime oblivion great love alone can bring. In the silence the clock struck twelve. "It seems a dream!" he exclaimed; "but we must wake up." Marcella's beautiful eyes gazed up at him full of tenderness; "but, my darling, you look so unlike your own dear self that I did not recognise who the gentle lady was that came to see me. We must see what can be done for you at once. I have devoted my life to my work, and it must not be for others only. It must be for us now!" At that moment he felt the full weight of the slight figure, for Marcella

had fainted in his arms. He turned his head. I had started up instinctively and had run towards them, and as I appeared in the doorway he looked relieved to see me.

"Give me that bottle on there," he said quietly.

The next day Sir Alan Charleston's partner was installed in the consulting-room ; the chief was absent, and it couldn't be said when he would return.

Marcella was taken to a nursing-home at Hampstead, and the man she loved was at her side. Either Mrs. Patrick or I were there in readiness whenever we were wanted. At times they were content to be silent, as all lovers sometimes are ; at other times, Marcella told me, they would talk of all those sad years that were past and wasted, or of the early and happier days. Marcella's feeble frame seemed about to collapse and the shadow of death was not far away. Yet how happy she was !

"I had to die," I heard her say to him gently one day, "but I thank God that I can die knowing that you have loved me and that you love me now. Yet death seems harder—and yet sweeter——"

"Courage, Marcella !" he interrupted. "Fight

against it ; you must have pluck for both our sakes ! I have found you—I will not lose you now ! " Then, saying he had some fresh flowers for her outside and motioning me to remain, he left her abruptly.

All his knowledge and experience which Dr. Rufford held in such deep respect seemed powerless to save her. He had summoned physician after physician in consultation, and every time their verdict was the same : quite hopeless. Yet he refused to accept it. One day he had evidently decided on his course of action. " Courage, Marcella ! " he began ; " I've made up my mind, and yours for you. We are going abroad to Davos—and we shall get married first—and later on we shall have a little villa on the sunny Mediterranean ! "

" Oh, Alan ! Is there time ? Do save me ! Take me with you ! "

The words had come as a whisper. He felt her pulse, then rose in haste. I noticed a look of alarm. I rang for Nurse Patrick, and hurriedly fetched a phial of medicine for him. The bottle rang against the glass as he poured out the liquid.

For a time our anxiety was acute. Her life hung on a thread—and even his existence seemed in the balance. Then there came a faint

hope of improvement when it was thought that that last effort would not prove in vain. He greeted me one day with the words :

" I think it is just possible now that we can save her, thank God ! It's only a chance ; but it *is* a chance. She has responded to the treatment." And his whole frame trembled with emotion. I pressed his hand in both of mine—triumph at his skill and my sympathy with both their sad lives culminating in such heavy trial overwhelmed me on hearing the good news.

CHAPTER IX

MARRIAGE BELLS

"HALLO, Little Mater! how are you?" It was my son's greeting. He had returned home; but, as usual at such times, he said little or nothing of his successes. In my pride I begged he would have his title of Doctor of Philosophy printed on his visiting cards, but he flatly refused, and, as no coaxing availed, I tried to persuade myself that perhaps he was right, and that "it would be beastly bad form." I comforted myself with the thought that his sojournings abroad were at last at an end, and that negotiations were already being discussed for him to enter into a partnership in London that would ensure him a good position, and allow him leisure for further research-work, such as had always been his ambition. When in due course the agreement was signed and settled, I breathed freely—we should live together again.

A few days later he took me to Charing Cross

Station to see some friends off for the Continent.

"My dear mother," said my son, with a show of authority grown habitual to him when responsible for me, "do calm yourself, and let me show you the right platform—you never know your way; it's not a bit of use darting about anywhere aimlessly—like a stickleback."

"I can't help feeling agitated, dear. There they are!" And off I rushed, leaving him to follow in his heavy leisurely way.

No wonder I was agitated. It was Sir Alan Charleston's wedding-day, and it was he who was leaving England with Marcella. He was taking her first to Davos; he was abandoning his brilliant position to devote his life to her and her cure. I found him and an elderly female attendant superintending the comfort of the precious invalid, who had been carried into the compartment and laid upon the cushions. As he covered her with shawls, she looked up at him with a happy smile like that of a contented child, then nodded gaily to us and other friends standing in a little knot on the platform. Some of us went in and kissed her, and I had an opportunity of a few words in private with my dear old doctor.

"You brought her to me," he said, clasping

my hand in his firm grasp. "Did you know what you were doing that day?"

"Indeed, no. Marcella had told me but little of her past life; I wouldn't let her dwell upon it as it seemed to give her so much pain. It was really old Dr. Rufford. I'm heartily glad for you and for her. But we shall miss you sadly. I never thought we should lose you like this. I thought you were perhaps destined to marry, but—to marry some one else."

"Some one else?" he asked, smiling in surprise.

Good heavens! I thought to myself, surely I'm not going to be so foolish as to put my foot in it again, when I had at last found the opportunity of clearing up that old matter. I became desperate.

"Yes. Don't you remember the drive you took me long ago, when you proclaimed that you were a confirmed old bachelor?"

"Now, don't be malicious. I remember it."

"Well, didn't you understand that I had some one in view for you?"

"Upon my life, no! It never crossed my mind. Who was the lady?" He looked at me so searchingly that I was now in a worse plight than ever, and my face grew hotter and hotter as I felt more and more uncomfortable.

"Who was it?" he repeated. "Not Aunt Rose, I hope?"

I felt inclined to answer "Yes" as an easy way out of it, only I thought he wouldn't believe it, and the case would be worse than ever, and there would be more arguing. I half wished the train would start.

"I'd rather not say," I answered lamely.

"Come, that's hardly fair after rousing my curiosity, is it?" He was laughing at my confusion.

"Well, she's married since then, and it's a very good thing you waited for Marcella! But didn't you really think there was some one I wanted you to marry, during that drive?" I persisted.

"Did she make a good match?" he counter-questioned.

"Not a very happy one; she married abroad."

"Hum!" he said reflectively; it was enigmatic, yet it made me fear I had said too much. "I never imagined you had any one in view. Never dreamt of marrying any one!" he added, with conviction; "but I am a happy man now. If only I can get her well again." And I thought of all the perturbation of mind that I might have saved myself had I exercised a little less imagination.

The train was due to start. "Where's our Scientific Department?" he asked gaily, looking round for my son. He was chatting with Marcella, whose acquaintance he had first made in Bâle. Sir Alan took an affectionate leave of us both before seating himself by his wife's side.

"Good-bye, and good luck to you both!" came from our little group. There was more heartiness than hope in the farewell.

Clairette—who had now become my maid—was *en fête* and intended to keep it up the whole day, in spite of the fact that the wedding of her former mistress had had none of the elements of jollity proper to such an occasion. Still it was *une noce*, and Clairette had herself dressed the poor invalid in her pretty white travelling dress in which she had been married. Clairette had received a handsome present, which had made her eyes look even brighter than usual.

Having a French maid amused me. To look at, Clairette was tiny and plump, dressed in black of faultless cut, showing not a vestige of white. Her face resembled a robin's with its beady eyes, alert and friendly look; she had much the same little rapid turn of the head, and her hair, combed high off the forehead, was

twisted into a Frenchy knot on the top. She was a dainty little person, sympathetic, sensible, and devoted, with a bright and frequent smile, with fingers as deft as Parisian fingers can be, and industrious as the ant in La Fontaine.

While assisting at my toilet she would flit about me as though I were a queen bee, stroke and smooth down folds, tug me up at the back and pull me down in front, and when I was ready she would open wide the door and look me up and down with unaffected pride—and madame wondered did she do her credit.

She was superstitious but religious. She would go to Sunday morning mass and then take one of her occasional peeps at our British ways. Yet she found Sundays so *tristes*—and they used to be so gay! Only a few years before, among her people, how she used to laugh and dance to the music of the violin at the fêtes on those unforgettable Sundays! Alas, how grey and dignified they were now!

Otherwise than to church she never cared to go out. She had always some excuse for shutting herself up like a nun with her needle —that delightful stitching which allowed her thoughts to fly yonder where the violin still moved the feet of the dancers in their relief from the week's grievous toil.

Now and then her eyes were very red. That was because she loved Paul Anatole Baptiste, who was a *perfide*. *Ce monsieur* lived in the south, where, under the shade of the eucalyptus trees, he kept a small but prosperous *charcuterie* shop. Poor Clairette! Why waste good tears on him, whose mind reached no farther than a *dot* and its use in the business?

"He is not worthy of you," I said. At that there was a toss of the head, and I felt her hands tremble as she coiled up my hair. "*Ah, pour ça madame!*" she said enigmatically, and stopped.

She evidently did not share my opinion, and Paul Anatole Baptiste was remembered and cherished in spite of his affections being *un peu partout*. Glad to change the conversation, she remarked, in reply to an exclamation of mine on the subject of wrinkles, suggested by the mirror before me:

"Wrinkles! Madame has no wrinkles. Madame must have had far more of them years ago before I had the honour to come to madame." I did not argue the point; her curious politeness startled me into dumbness.

Clairette was punctual—that is, with a twenty minutes' margin to make her so; consequently, by bearing that interval in mind when I gave

my orders, I got everything to the minute I required it: so every one was happy and content, and everything went like clockwork.

Her wages were what Englishwomen call high, and her savings all went in *obligations*, of which the interest was sent off to the aged mother — a sourish old lady — and to the numerous brothers and sisters at home, who were more grasping and lazy than was proper. She had a kind heart, had Clairette, they thought, and so they traded upon it.

She had the thrift and practised the little saving devices of the *petite bourgeoisie*. One day, when she was darning with miraculous precision, I remarked approvingly upon her talent for economy in my interest. She was gratified at the compliment, but replied with a sad little shrug of despair:

"*Mon Dieu! oui, madame.* But sometimes I ask myself *à quoi bon?* I make the economies for madame, when, *pang! Monsieur son fils achète un tableau!*"

Business papers and the *Liste Officielle* would frequently arrive to tell her of all the *gros lots* which had been won by other people. If only she could gain a *gros lot!* It would make a *dot*, and the world for her would be a less disappointing sort of world, and grey England

would become a sad, sweet memory. For then she could marry and help keep that shop near the orange trees if *ce monsieur le voulait*, and madame would come and see how well she could bring up a family.

One morning my son blurted out at me without the slightest preliminary:

"I'm in love, Mater."

"Yes, dear; I know it."

"Know it! How do you know it?" he exclaimed.

"Because I do," I replied quietly.

"Logical, and very feminine. But you don't know who the angel is, and you'll never guess."

"I hope I *can* guess this time," I replied, with a sudden flutter of anxiety as I advanced towards him standing with his back to the fireplace.

"Promise you'll be pleased and I'll tell you."

"Surely it's Dulcie Ryan?" I asked impulsively, with my eyes riveted on his face. "Oh, I *am* so pleased!" I added, laughing—laughing and crying together in my silly way when I'm greatly excited and relieved at the same time. I put both my arms round him, and hugged him very tight.

He beamed down on me.

"But, Mater," he said, stroking my face

soothingly—an old habit of his—"can she possibly care for me, do you think? That's the question."

"I wonder," I replied, just to tease him.

"By Jove! You don't mean to say you know anything?"

"I wonder," I reiterated, laughing with quiet happiness.

He made me sit next to him, and I had to begin at the beginning and confess how I had watched and guessed—often watched him as he was pondering in front of the fire and sighing unconsciously, whilst I was *so* occupied knitting him a silk tie. Then he would abstractedly fill his pipe and forget to light it. Never before had I known him so particular about the cut either of his coat or his razor.

My thoughts flew to directions penned by him to the laundress which she had brought tearfully to me for elucidation—sarcastic remarks regarding the corrugated surface of shirt-fronts which cast cross shadows and references to handkerchiefs resembling frizzled muslin.

"Whatever are you thinking about? Do go on, Mater."

I went on. I assured him, from my experience of the sex to which I had the honour

to belong (the words are his), that I certainly could not think Dulcie avoided him; I was airly satisfied that she felt no unconquerable repulsion for him which might fairly be described as akin to loathing; to tell the truth, in fact, that I knew she had loved him, and no one else, for a long time past. My son was radiant.

"Although," I added, "she may probably object to you on account of your hands—as I do. I really think you might have directed your scientific research towards discovering something to prevent chemicals staining, instead of waiting till they have made you an advertisement for a dye-works."

"I'm off!" he cried, starting up. "I'm going to see Mr. Ryan at once!" And he was out of the room and the house before I had time to stop him to discuss the matter further.

When the front door slammed to I called MacDonald to me to divert my restless thoughts. He roused himself lazily from the rug with a heavy sigh. He was really a very handsome collie, but no longer the alert dog he used to be, no longer the admiration of the neighbourhood for his looks and gentle intelligence. His tail was becoming thin on the top; he was a trifle hard of hearing; just a shade

short-sighted. He shook himself leisurely, wagged his baldness, and placed his dear old head on my lap. I told him the great news of the new love and all it meant to us, and he acknowledged my confidence with his usual series of uncouth squeaks and grunts — his running commentary on any conversation addressed to him.

"That's all, Don," I concluded, and MacDonald decided at last which way he would lie down again, tucked in his tail, and began to snore.

I watched and waited, unable to settle down to anything. At last I recognised a heavy tread, and before my son was in the boudoir he exclaimed:

"Silly old fool won't hear of it!"

He flung himself on the sofa, and we looked at one another.

"Silly old ass."

"Mr. Ryan's not silly, not old, and not an ass," I expostulated, hardly knowing in my deep concern what I was saying.

"Oh, well, it comes to the same thing," he answered, with gloomy impatience.

"Why?"

"Says that he had no idea I cared for her."

"Oh!"

"Says he can't spare her—more can I—unadulterated selfishness, *I* call it." He paused, frowning; then added, more gently, "Would it be any good for you to speak to him, Mater, do you think?"

"I'm afraid my speaking to him can't make any difference, dear."

My son shrugged his shoulders, sighed, and left the room. MacDonald followed him dejectedly, feeling instinctively there was trouble.

I resolved to lay siege to Mr. Ryan, especially as I didn't quite understand his objection; and I desired, too, to find out if it were the real reason.

Old memories came crowding to my mind as I set forth to call next door. I could understand his hesitation and tribulation; Dulcie was his only child. She was a lovely girl, nearly as tall as my son; willowy, graceful, with beautifully shaped blue eyes and perfect eyebrows, *retroussé* nose, and a provokingly small mouth—a charming, merry, oval little face, framed in golden brown hair which curled as though from the very *joie de vivre*. Her father's comfort continued paramount with her; she had kept him free from worries, free always to do his literary work with a calm mind. His, of course, had not been a well-assorted

union, and it made him doubly anxious for his daughter's happiness.

I was ushered into his great library, where he received me with his usual courtesy, and we had a long and earnest talk on our children's future. At the end he said:

"Well, there's no withstanding you. I like the boy — none better — a strapping, clever fellow. But I must own he took me too much by surprise. You have every reason to be proud of him, my dear friend, and I trust that my little girl will bring you both the happiness you deserve."

I choked with my reply. We cordially shook hands, and my heart thumped with delight as I hurried—almost ran—home to my son.

"It's all right!" I cried.

"Thank God!" he responded, and irreverently added, "particularly you." Then he executed a *pas seul*, curiously undignified in a B.Sc., Ph.D.

So it was arranged between us three that Dulcie should be told nothing until my son proposed to her.

Then the hour came: six o'clock on a lovely June evening. I called for Dulcie and drove to Hyde Park, where we left the carriage and were joined by my son. The sudden surprise

A Pas Seul

suffused Dulcie's sunny face with blushes. We walked to a cool, shady spot under the trees and sat down ; but no sooner were we seated than I preferred not to remain.

" I have a fancy for a solitary stroll," I said; " I want to think out something. Don't detain me ; I won't be detained."

There is no gainsaying that no one tried to. So I walked away, and found much to think out—the future was going to be so different, but happy, I felt confident of that.

When I turned back, I found my dear young people coming rapidly towards me as though on air, radiant in their new happiness. How small I felt as they stooped down to kiss me ! Only a few words passed between us ; our hearts were too full to say much ; we could only smile at one another, whilst the bonds of love and sympathy held us tightly.

They decided between themselves to live near her father, and that I was to stay with them. Loud were their protests when I firmly opposed the proposal. At one time I had all but yielded, for I was sorely tempted ; but the dreaded fear of becoming, even suspected of developing into, *la belle-mère* was sufficiently deterrent. But when Dulcie hit upon it that she and her husband should live in a flat adjoining another

that should be occupied by me, she found a solution to which I joyfully assented.

Charlie Lane had obtained his promotion, so it was arranged that the wedding-day of the four friends should take place on the same day. That day arrived all too soon for me, especially for poor Mr. Ryan, who was really a little sad at the idea; in fact, at times, we would laugh nervously at the sight of one another's happy chagrin, and the date seemed to be in fire-red letters in a perpetually present calendar. The wedding reception was held in my drawing-room. Mr. Ryan was on one side of me to help receive, Aunt Prue on the other. Dear Aunt Prue! in lavender silk, beaming with delight under her cream silk bonnet.

Amidst all the excitement the only lost head belonged to Clairette—the idea of *une fête* was indeed heaven to her. Mr. Ryan was very silent. I behaved in the most exemplary fashion, in grey *crêpe de Chine;* but when everybody had gone, and I was once more quite alone, I actually did sink down on the hearthrug in all my finery and wept, which was all the more senseless as I was extremely gratified and happy in the acquisition of a charming and much-desired daughter-in-law. MacDonald tried to comfort me, putting his

wet nose on my neck, but it lacked adequacy, and I peremptorily ordered him off my *crêpe de Chine*. I apologised to him later on, over which ceremony there was a considerable show of goodwill on his part, accompanied by many forgiving wags of his poor tail, more especially as my *amende honorable* was paid in wedding-cake.

When I had plucked up sufficient spirit, I moved myself, Clairette, and MacDonald into the new flat at Chelsea that had been chosen for me ; and Mr. Ryan moved himself and his library into rooms at a private hotel close by, which, in future, was to be his home. It was a decision he had arrived at after declining other suggestions, declaring he could put up with no one but himself, so his future must depend on the amiability of Williams, his valet. He had the same dislike of keeping on his own deserted home now, as I had of keeping on mine.

Our boy and girl spent their honeymoon in Devonshire. The two months passed like a week, so they said. To me those eight weeks had seemed eight years, yet were not long enough to mend the wrench long hoped for, yet long dreaded. I felt the breach would remain until arms, small and helpless as his used to be, were once again around my neck.

I need not say that Dulcie was as good a wife as could be wished. She was not very "clever"—we knew that—but intelligent and womanly and sympathetic. She was so proud of her husband that it made my eyes dance with pleasure to see it. And he was quite satisfied that she was far too pretty to be any different from what she was, nor would he have her otherwise.

There was, however, one silly little cloud which for a short space darkened their horizon, a few months after they were married. Perhaps I should never have known of it had I not happened to choose that very day to spend some pleasant hours with them at their week-end cottage in Wimbledon. I was accustomed to turn up unexpectedly, and that afternoon I was longing to see them. To my surprise, on arriving I found my son writing, worried and distressed.

"Where's Dulcie?" I asked.

He looked relieved at seeing me, and after greeting me affectionately, he replied in rather a hard voice, I thought:

"She has shut herself up in her room. She was angry yesterday about nothing; said she would never forgive me, and this morning won't talk. It's a novel experience—that's all. So I'm waiting patiently."

Nevertheless he turned impatiently towards the window and whistled.

I wasn't going to ask questions. I sat still and waited, watching him. It was not long before he continued:

"It's all fancy on her part, Mater. I wouldn't really make her unhappy for worlds."

"No, dear — especially just now. Every allowance must be made for her."

"This is what happened. We were up in town at the theatre last evening. Dulcie had asked me to take a box. I recognised a club friend in the stalls; I nodded at him and smiled. Then I suppose my eyes wandered to the stage, and Dulcie conceived the idea that my unfaded smile was for some one on the stage, whom I had just praised. It is the first time I have ever known her show jealousy. I have explained it all to her. Her behaviour is ridiculous."

He shrugged his shoulders and continued writing. I took up a newspaper and felt sad.

After a time my son looked up and said:

"Will you go to her, Mater?"

I shook my head. I knew instinctively it was better not; I did so want *him* to go. But I knew his nature—sometimes over hasty, and always obstinate to a degree under an injustice.

So I took care the suggestion should not come from me.

After a while, however, I did venture to remark in a low voice:

"She requires a little spoiling, I think."

Perhaps he didn't hear me; he didn't move.

The lamps had been lighted and the curtains drawn when the well-known step and rustle were heard, and Dulcie came in, looking white and pitiful. She was in her husband's arms immediately. I was about to withdraw, but she clung hold of my hand, full of self-reproaches, which I interrupted to say:

"I want you to see how I've got on with the needlework. I've left it in the hall. Thank you," I added quickly, as my son moved to bring it, "I'd rather go myself; you might crush it."

Dulcie was very fond of needlework, and greatly interested in it just now. So was I. One would have said we were making doll's clothes; but we were not. I didn't fetch the parcel at once. Desirous of leaving my son and his wife alone together, I thought I would take a peep at the newly-furnished room up-stairs, and I didn't hurry.

When I opened the white-painted door—still rather sticky—how pretty it all looked, bathed

in the moonlight which entered through the curtainless window! And how expectant! with the white bassinette wrapped in tissue paper. The high fender stood there, so officious and important. The rocking-chair, the low chair, and in the corner even a high chair—all patiently waiting. The bright, droll pictures on the walls —funny animals doing queer things—ready for the delight and approval of a miniature student of art. And there, in the window, with its gilt wires turned to silver in the white light, a bird-cage was hanging with its tiny door wide open, awaiting the little bird to come. I withdrew with a throb of joy in my heart.

A few days later my son came into my flat, full of importance, and said:

"Mater, put on your bonnet and shawl—or whatever you call them—and quickly, if you please."

"Now, my boy, whatever do you want to do?"

"Well, just look sharp, there's a dear, and we'll argue afterwards. I've got an appointment with Lawrence Whyte."

"What—are you ill?"

"I'm all right. But I want an opinion from him."

"Then what do you want me for?"

"For the opinion. We'll argue afterwards. You've just got five minutes."

When we were driving there, he explained that I was not looking strong—my health has never been very good—and he meant to persuade my cousin to order me to the south of France for the winter—which that obliging wiseacre incontinently did.

"Surely," I said as we returned, "you have enough to look after just now, without troubling so much about your old mother."

He smiled, and merely replied that he was going at once to consult Dulcie about arrangements. In the end we three, and Mr. Ryan—who vowed he would pine away alone in his rooms the second his neighbours left—found ourselves in Nice.

Clairette, of course, accompanied me; her rapture was unbounded at the idea of going to *ce beau littoral;* but I knew it was not so much the place that she was anxious to revisit, although she deemed it wise to keep her own counsel, and of late had mentioned no one there. But it was a forlorn little maid when we arrived, glancing anxiously at all the people in the station, loitering, or hurrying by, and no one approaching her who looked in any way like bearing the names of Paul Anatole Baptiste.

"You shall go out this evening, Clairette, to see your friends here," I suggested.

"*Merci, madame—madame est bien bonne,*" she replied disconsolately.

I was in a great hurry to see some of my own dear friends, and the very first thing next morning my son and I set out to visit Sir Alan and Lady Charleston, who had taken up their abode at a villa situated on the hill above our hotel. It was about eighteen months since they had left England, and in the interval their news had been delightful reading. They expected us, and our meeting was of the most cordial description.

"What do you think of her now, eh?" asked Sir Alan, beaming with pride.

"Why, Marcella! If it were not for your auburn hair I never would have recognised you!" I exclaimed, in the greatest surprise. She looked very pretty, very happy, and though not robust, in perfect health.

"And how is our married Scientific Department?" continued Sir Alan; "and why hasn't he brought Mrs. Dulcie to see us?"

"She's just a little fatigued," replied my son. "You see, she——"

"Come and look here!" said Marcella, putting her arm round my waist, and she

drew me through the open window on to the verandah.

"Oh, you perfect little darling!" I cried, kneeling down next to the dearest love of a baby with an auburn fluff on his otherwise bald head, lying there on a rug sunning his chubby legs as he babbled sweet sounds commonly designated crowing and cooing.

"I say," said my son, approaching, "what a jolly little beggar!"

The eyes of the parents were riveted on their offspring. We looked at one another as he helped me to my feet, and we smiled happily —we were not envious.

"Your mother isn't looking quite herself," remarked Sir Alan, before my meaning smile had quite vanished, slightly to my confusion.

"That's the reason we came here," replied my son.

"Quite right. She'll be in my care—friendly care, for I don't practise here—as long as you remain."

"Then the Mater will get well too soon," came the grateful reply. "I proposed remaining six weeks. Dulcie is advised not to be away longer."

"Then the little lady must be got strong punctually to time," answered Sir Alan, laughing.

"So we shall expect to see her every day if she will come." And Marcella warmly seconded his proposal.

Every one has always been so good to me. Why don't I think of that and find comfort in it in those bad moments which come perhaps not more often to me than they do to others who have known the deepest scars of sorrow? What is the use of a philosophy hidden underground for a rainy day, garnered and fostered in one's good moments, when one's mood is apt to become morbid, and never recognises such an existing myth as philosophy? (I like to call resignation "philosophy.") What is the use of my coming to the conclusion that life is too short to be troubled by anything less than serious illness; that minor worries should be waived aside as non-existent, such elimination to be wrought by occupying it with philosophic argument, when if I just happen to feel overwrought, or a dress misfits, or my memorandum book is mislaid—it is sufficient to make me feel that the end of the world has come, or is just waiting round the corner, as it were, for the final smash? I suppose it must be different when one has that priceless possession, a logical mind; but then the "one" is generally masculine, and men as a rule don't seem to

like their womenfolk to include that commodity in their mental outfit. Perhaps it is jealousy of their prerogative; but I think it is really the strangeness that they fight shy of when they unexpectedly discover sequential argument in a woman. I must own that on the rare occasions when I have met with the phenomenon, I have found that "logic" of a somewhat aggressive character, rapped out with jarring emphasis, with a conscious superiority which wholly crushed me, while any gentlemen present began forthwith to drift away towards any illogical femininity there might happen to be in the room.

Marcella was by no means one of those psychological Minervas. She was an excellent type of womanhood, and we spent many happy hours together.

"Isn't it wonderful what Alan has done for me!" she exclaimed, on one of my daily visits. "I believed I was irretrievably doomed—otherwise I never could have— I've often wondered what you could have thought that day, and then I have flushed with——"

"It has all been for the best, dear!" I quickly interrupted.

"Ah! if only my poor mother could see me now!" The baby was asleep in Marcella's

arms, and as she spoke she pressed it closer to her. "She had made an unhappy match herself. She had everything she could possibly want in mere possessions, but she was neglected. All her love was centred on me."

"And a husband's love is everything," I said sympathetically.

"Indeed it is. Poor mother! May I tell you about it? It won't bore you? Very well. She wanted me to be happy; my cousin, Barthold Delacambre, was her sister's son, an orphan with a brilliant position in Paris—and he loved me. But my affection was already bestowed on Alan; he had no prospects then, no strong position, and I learnt later, that as my mother did not approve of his visits, he showed me but scant attention. Soon he discontinued calling altogether. I sent him a letter, which elicited only a curt reply, and I concluded he didn't care for me. In my wounded pride, pressed by my mother's constant persuasion and my cousin's entreaties, I yielded, and was married to him. We three lived together in Paris, as I had made it a condition I should not be separated from my mother.—Does all this interest you?"

"Of course it does; besides, I value your confidence."

"I was always so sad before when I thought of the past that I never told you as I would have done what——"

"I guessed that. I didn't wish it, or expect it, Marcella."

"Well, I must admit that Barthold was a devoted and a model husband, who bore with all my spoilt caprices, and humoured every whim—until one day. He wanted to spend a few weeks quietly at our country place where our brief honeymoon had been passed; I was cross at the idea of the monotony after the gay life we were accustomed to lead, of which he and my mother were getting tired. On that he asked:

"'Then I'm not enough? You don't love me, then, Marcelle *chérie?*' But he said it smilingly, at first never doubting a satisfactory reply. He repeated the question more seriously, but, I thought, a little surprised, and I answered nothing. I didn't deny it; and I begged to be left alone, as I was crying hysterically. The idea must have been growing in his mind that I really did not care for him. A few days later he again taxed me with it; I was evasive, I couldn't be hypocritical, for I realised more and more the mistake of a marriage made when the heart is sick with a disappointment.

The day came when he insisted upon an explanation. We had our first quarrel—and our last, for Barthold learned the truth, and from that moment he was entirely changed.

"'Why did you marry me, then?' he asked bitterly. And I explained that I had thought I could make him happy; that I had thought he need never know of my sorrow; that I had tried to stifle my old love for a man whom I wished never to see again; and that I should find my mother regain her old brightness. But the burden had proved too heavy, and he had forced the truth from me. His stern, set face frightened me, and I crept away and locked myself in my room.

"By arrangement we said nothing about it to my mother. She was, nevertheless, not slow to guess it, for Barthold took to gambling at his *cercle* and to late hours, and she and I found ourselves usually left alone. She said nothing, however, until after her return from one of her visits to London. She found me alone that evening, and ascertained by inquiry that Barthold had scarcely been at home during her absence. Then she talked and talked, and worked upon herself so that she nearly raved, about the way I was neglected.

"'I cannot blame him,' I rejoined so sadly

that the whole of the situation dawned on her. She remained silent for a time till she had recovered her self-possession, and she questioned me closely about 'that other,' as she called him, and then her self-reproaches were heart-rending. Nothing that I could do or say brought her comfort. It killed her, it literally killed her; she drooped and weakened, and consumption set in.

"'What will you do, my poor Marcella, when I am gone?' she asked one evening, in her thin, worn voice. 'Your husband is nothing to you, and you have not the solace I had of tiny hands to kiss and baby curls to stroke.'

"Those were her last words. Before I could reply she sank back and died. Ah! if only my poor mother could see me now," repeated Marcella; and her tears dropped down on to the little closed eyes and opened them as though by magic.

"Hallo!" said Sir Alan, entering and taking in the situation at a glance. "Now that precocious infant has been getting into debt or something, and you are thinking you must pawn your jewellery, Marcella. This is a nice way of entertaining a visitor. Why, you both look as dull as a doctor without a practice."

I loved her all the more since that visit, for

confidence such as hers always draws more closely the bonds of sympathy between one woman and another.

When I got back to my hotel, Clairette came to me radiant. A small box had been brought for her by hand. It contained flowers grown near the eucalyptus and the lemon trees, and amongst them were orange blossoms. And—"*Ah, mon Dieu! Que madame s'imagine! des fleurs d'oranger! et—et—*" And he who had brought them was Paul Anatole Baptiste, and he was waiting to know if there was any answer.

"Don't let him wait," I urged, and she was gone in a moment.

It was decided that she would remain in my service until my departure, then she would marry Paul Anatole Baptiste; and while *ce monsieur* looked after the *charcuterie* she would spend several hours daily making herself useful *avec Monsieur Bébé chez Miladi "Charleton"—jusque*—well, not indefinitely, perhaps. "*Elever mes enfants à moi*" was Clairette's ambition, which properly embraced her horizon of the Whole Duty of Woman.

Towards the end of our stay, I sat, one lovely sunny morning, at the window of my little *salon* in the hotel on the hill, and thought of the dear

people who had brought me there. Whenever I think of my son I cannot help that rising feeling of pride. Of pride—or is it gratitude? Were I not that boy's mother I should frankly declare that he had been successively the finest child, the most intelligent youth, and the most delightful man I know. Convention, however, decrees against partisan eulogy, and I must leave it to all who know him, and have eyes in their head, to bear witness to this solemn truth of their own free will.

And now there he was, he and his charming wife, the devoted daughter I had so long wished for. My happiness would be complete; but, alas!—One had been taken. What matters it that it was so many years ago? Though I never care to talk about it, the thought never leaves me for long, and the void remains as it was. Time has not bestirred himself to bring comfort to me. Moved by the ever sad reflection, I looked out on the beautiful scene below, and gazed on it as through a veiled mist. Nature was smiling, and so the mist faded and my cares for the moment were forgotten. The hot sun was shining brightly, and made all around look happy and at peace. On whatever the rays fell they warmed through and through with the noonday heat. No breeze stirred the branches

of the palms and the orange trees, or disturbed the equanimity of the rich-scented roses in their pride and glory. Red-roofed villas had closed their shutters and were slumbering. The town, massed near the sea, was quiet just now ; whilst beyond, the Mediterranean, still as a mirror, reflected the unclouded blue of the sky.

From time to time sounds of life rang clear through the air—men's voices chanting an Italian verse in unison, the bells on the horses, the cracking of whips, and a child's laugh as the little one startled away a basking lizard. To the right, Antibes stretched out a protecting arm round the gentle Baie des Anges ; and on the left rose the timbered height crowned with a cascade, glinting fillets of silver, near the murmuring rush of which rested those whose slumber was longer than the noonday siesta, for whom there would be no awakening to the follies of the squeezed-up town below.

There was a tap at the door.

" Entrez ! "

Clairette came in wearing her fête face, which of late had begun rather to go on my nerves, and said with an air of mystery: *" Monsieur Ryenne demande s'il peut voir, madame ! "*

" Mais certainement, faîtes entrer ! "

Clairette smiled, approached me, and saying her usual little "Pardon, madame!" put the tortoiseshell comb in my hair at a different angle, surveyed me with evident pleasure, and went swiftly out of the room.

"*Que Monsieur se donne la peine d'entrer!*"

Mr. Ryan entered, looking serious. I rose anxiously to meet him at the door, as I love to do to those I like.

"I want to speak to you," he said gently, shaking my hand slowly, "upon an important matter. You know my bluntness, so you will forgive my broaching the subject abruptly. It is a matter which concerns us two alone—not the children."

I felt instinctively what was coming, and, what was worse, I felt I was betraying myself, for my hands shook. I began to tremble, and was obliged to take the seat he offered me.

"You are not well?" he asked, distressed. "You said yesterday you were quite strong again."

"Quite—quite," I repeated, pulling myself together.

"As you know, I am fifty," he continued, "and your looks, dear friend, tell me——"

"That I am forty-seven at least," I quickly interrupted.

He looked at me reproachfully, and then in his pleasant way added:

"Let me see. I was enabled to make a different calculation when you once replied to an objection of mine concerning youthful marriages—yes—not twenty, I believe, when your son was born. Now why should you put on five extra years?"

I couldn't repress a guilty smile. He laughed, then continued seriously:

"I knew you as a young girl, and——"

"And soon, very soon," I interrupted again, "we shall know one another as grandparents."

"Yes, yes," he retorted, somewhat impatiently, "but you are younger than I am, and I'm not an old man yet." He certainly showed no signs of age. He had become celebrated since the early days he spoke of. His name was almost a household word as a man of letters.

He seated himself close beside me, and his dark eyes, piercing and intelligent, gazed at me sympathetically.

"You are lonely. You require care. May I——"

"Please, hush," I said pleadingly, avoiding his look. But he went on:

"For many years I have hoped that in time—

I have something I want to say, something I have waited so long to tell you," he went on hurriedly. "I have waited to see the happiness of our children assured, and now let me be selfish and plead a little for myself—for a happiness I have never had, and that you alone could give." His voice was so soft and low, vibrating with ardour as he continued, not heeding my gesture to stop him:

"I have loved you for years. I have worshipped you as a saint on a pedestal high above me. I have waited in trembling to see how your life might turn out, without daring to hope for myself. And now I beg you to condescend to step down from your pedestal—to be my wife. Give me the right to call you by that name which suits you so well—how often have I whispered it to myself!"

"Oh no, no!" I exclaimed hastily, as my mind flew back to words so similar that these sounded like an echo of long ago. "Forgive me," I murmured, mustering courage to look into his face, and wondering at the sudden change I saw in it; "I wasn't thinking of—oh, please, I——"

He seated himself next to me and took my cold hand in his warm grasp, and I felt soothed; his kind eyes were still fixed on me.

"Tell me," he said gently; "I have seen you for years surrounded by people, men and women, who cared much for you and sought your sympathy. Do you love any one else? Are you not heart free? It is not that I am unsympathetic to you, is it?"

"You are not unsympathetic to me," I replied, turning aside. "Dear Mr. Ryan, it is true, I am not heart free."

"Is it too indiscreet to beg your confidence? Pray tell me—I'm such an old friend. Your welfare means so much to me. What fortunate man can have——"

"Not in the present—in the past. The only man I ever loved, I have loved and lost," I added wearily, without looking up.

"But time, surely——"

"Time can do no more than release me from my sorrow."

"If now, you cannot feel any love in your heart for me—is there no measure of affection I can lay claim to?" he pleaded. "Is there not a little sympathy that might grow, that——"

"Hush! You distress me."

He said no more, but rose and went to the window. The interval before he spoke again was well-nigh unbearable. I saw him mechanically take out his cigar-case, and slowly cut off

the tip of a cigar with his penknife. He stared at it with curious interest. A white butterfly flew in through the open window, fluttered about the glass, its strong shadow bobbing about on the lace curtain. He gazed at it with a sort of soulless attention. The French clock on the mantelpiece ticked with extraordinary energy. Outside, a man's rich southern voice was singing, *Mandoli, Mandola.* He lighted a match, then suddenly realising what he was doing he blew it out. How my heart ached! Surely I felt as wretched as he. If only he hadn't spoken! Mr. Ryan turned. Never before had I noticed how accentuated his stoop had become. He was quite pale. Was it the southern morning light that deepened the lines about his mouth—or was it I that had— A sob rose to my aching throat, which was hard and dry.

"I blame myself," he said sadly; his voice was unsteady, and it unnerved me to hear it. "My loneliness made me selfish. I have distressed you, and, believe me, I would not cause you pain if I could help it. But I shall always cherish you in my heart; you cannot prevent that."

"Your regard is very precious to me," I replied, breathing more freely again. "And I

shall value your esteem and feel very grateful for it. Your presence has always been so very welcome to me—such a comfort to me. Don't deprive me of it," I added wistfully.

"My dear friend, indeed I shall take advantage of what you say. *I* shall take comfort in seeing you oftener than in the past, and shall claim the privilege of taking upon myself just a little of the care the children take of you. You will let me do that?"

I tried to smile. He quickly raised my hand to his lips and walked quietly away.

I moved to where he had stood at the window, and again I gazed on the red-roofed villas below, on the orange trees and the smooth sea, and again my eyes wandered to the timbered height to the left with its cascade glinting fillets of silver, and—I couldn't stifle the feeling—I longed to be in that deep calm slumber with those others, near by. So calmly at rest.

When I looked round my son was standing before me. He said:

"Pa-in-law has just gone—slunk off, I might say— Halloa!" looking at me narrowly, "what's up? I know he thinks tons of you. Good Lord!" he exclaimed, stroking his beard, "he hasn't been——"

I wasn't listening to what else he was saying; those words of his sounded peculiarly familiar in my ears, as though I had lived through it all before. Where had I heard those words before? Yes, now I knew; they were bringing back to my mind Charlie, my son's friend—Charlie's boyish craze—Charlie, who had married Alma Dryden.

— "I should have imagined," added my son thoughtfully, "that with so many admirers, and being altogether such a helpless little Mater to battle alone with the world, that she would have——"

"Oh no, you wouldn't," I interrupted in a whisper, burying my face in my hands; "you wouldn't had you been old enough to remember your father."

CHAPTER X

A PRIVATE MATTER

By the time we returned home I was as strong as usual, thanks to Sir Alan. Dulcie was installed quietly at Wimbledon, and my son came to town daily to attend to his work and to see me each evening before he went back. Mr. Ryan called every morning, before settling down to write, in order to see if he could be of any use to me, and to hear whatever family news there was. I visited Aunt Prue frequently, and MacDonald kept me company during the intervals ; the poor dog's eyesight and hearing had grown defective, and care had to be taken when out-of-doors that he should not be run over, like any other old gentleman.

In fact, he was getting too old for anything but a pension, and there was talk of his beating a dignified retreat to the stables, where we knew the coachman's wife would soothe his old age with unlimited tripe ; but I put off the evil hour of parting with him—I couldn't bear the idea of seeing the hearthrug untenanted—or (dreadful

suggestion of the coachman's) a new hearthrug that would always remind me of poor Don.

The week-ends we all spent together at Wimbledon, and very delightful those days were, with strolls on the Common so specially favoured with glorious sunsets, and drives in the neighbourhood—in the most congenial of all company, harmonious and cheerful. They seemed, too, to do Mr. Ryan much good ; he didn't keep such late hours, and took something of a holiday. Something of a holiday, I say, for he never took a real holiday, asserting always that the only times he tried taking a real rest were the only times he got laid up with headache ; so we had long left off persuading him to give up working so hard. Thus the weeks slipped evenly on.

One morning, when Mr. Ryan had just left my flat, I was apprised that Mrs. Dryden was awaiting me in the drawing-room. I wondered what could have possibly brought her at that unconventional hour, she who was so very conventional in everything. In fact, Mrs. Dryden was one of those formal women who never under any circumstances "let themselves go," and would evince no small surprise if any one else should ever do anything at all informal. Very tall, and very stiff, she looked as though

she were encased, more or less, in whalebone from head to foot; and not even a wisp of her stiff chevelure was ever by a single hair sympathetically misplaced. My blue silk gown was too pretty to be conventional, so I hurried in to her, saying:

"I wouldn't keep you waiting, Mrs. Dryden, whilst I dressed."

"Good morning! Pray forgive *me* for calling at such an unearthly hour; but I thought I should be sure to find you at home, and you *have* no day." The latter was said in a tone of reproach—it was rather a habit with her, these innuendos with a subtle little sting.

"I'm glad to see my friends at any time," I replied innocently, but with a slight weighing on the "friends." I didn't care for her, but one must put up with people in this world as amiably as one can. She did not approve of her son-in-law, and that rather hurt me. "Pray sit down, Mrs. Dryden."

"I have come," she said, seating herself on the stiffest-looking chair and eyeing my frivolous laces and bangles of charms with evident disapproval for one in my lone condition. "I have come," she repeated, concentrating her attention on what was in her mind, "to talk to you about Alma."

"I hope," I replied, with a smile of anticipation, "that that implies good news, present, or prospective."

Mrs. Dryden looked at me coldly. "I have come to talk to you about Alma—about her ill-assorted match. Of course she is unhappy. What could she expect?"

I was thoroughly disconcerted. "Ill-assorted, did you say?"

"She *would* marry him, you know." This was a covert reproach at my connivance.

"I thought they were so happy!" I exclaimed. "You are surely mistaken—perhaps, perhaps you don't quite understand her."

"If I don't understand her, who on earth should?" she asked petulantly.

"Of course, but——"

"Allow me to assure you there's no 'but' about it. She's thoroughly unhappy; any one can see that at a glance."

"I haven't seen Alma since before I went away," I ventured in excuse. "Indeed, I'm most distressed at what you tell me. Charlie, then, is unhappy too?"

"I can't say. I don't pretend to understand him. His ways are not my ways; but of course I never interfere. I am glad your son's marriage has turned out so successfully, though Alma

would, I am sure, have made just as good a wife. The whole affair was *most* peculiar."

"Has Alma told you she is so unhappy?"

A shadow passed over Mrs. Dryden's face as she admitted:

"Alma is very reticent always. She doesn't confide in me as she might—girls have queer notions nowadays. I thought that — that — perhaps you might——"

I was uncharitable enough to let her stumble on—this mother who was only just beginning to realise all she had lost in her hitherto light appreciation of her only daughter's affection. It is extraordinary how often it happens that only the grandchild's appeal will awaken the maternal instinct so long dormant.

"No, I haven't seen her since before I went abroad, when she seemed quite her usual self. I wonder what could have happened. Have you any grounds for thinking——"

Mrs. Dryden rose. She seemed unusually flurried; the conventional mask was lifted slightly.

"Don't go," I urged. "I wish I could be of some service."

"I have some shopping to do. I only came on the chance. I hope I didn't disturb you. I look forward to the pleasure of seeing you on

one of my Tuesdays soon, if you can manage it. Good morning!"

"You are very kind. Good morning!"

I rang the bell, and was glad when I heard the lift taking her away. I returned to the morning-room and wrote a letter to Alma, inviting her to come and lunch with me next day. I thought, before seeing her, that I would corroborate Mrs. Dryden's statement by interrogating my son, so when he paid me the late afternoon visit, and I had heard how Dulcie was, I said:

"I haven't seen anything of the Lanes for a long time. You and Dulcie dined there last week, didn't you?"

"Yes, and a very nice little dinner it was; you want to know the *menu*, of course? Excellent soup, whitebait. Let me see what came next? Oh, it was——"

"Yes, yes," I said impatiently.

"Don't you want to know, Mater? You always do; it must have been—no, I've clean forgotten."

"Never mind, dear. Were they looking well and happy?"

"First rate. She has grown handsomer than ever—but not a patch on Dulcie."

"Of course, she isn't. And—and Charlie?"

"Charlie is an excellent host. And he's got some jolly good cigars."

"I thought you preferred the plebeian pipe, you two."

"So we do; but pipes belong to bachelor days. Wives don't like them."

"How about mothers?"

"I suppose poor little mothers are used to sacrificing themselves," rejoined my son, laughing.

"Did Charlie say anything about Alma when you smoked?"

"We only got on to the remote time of our student days." He glanced at the clock. "I say! I've left so little time, and I promised I'd run in and see pa-in-law; he gets anxious about Dulcie, and I don't think he's over well himself. I may lose my train."

"Then hurry, dear. Give Dulcie my best love, please, and tell her I am longing to come down and see her before the end of the week."

"Is that a promise?" he said, embracing me.

"Yes. Willingly."

I tormented myself half the night about the affairs of Charlie and Alma, all the more for having had no news of them for so long, and in the circumstances it seemed that no news might be bad news.

Alma came punctually, rather showily dressed, I thought, and greeted me affectionately as usual. She talked about things in general in her airy, slightly cynical way during luncheon, and I hoped she would touch upon her own affairs later. We took coffee cosily together in my sanctum, but she evidently had no idea of confiding anything, if indeed she had anything to confide. Time was slipping on, and I feared my one opportunity would be lost.

"I'm glad to hear Charlie is so well," I began, as a starting point. "It seems so curious to think of him married—such a dear baby he was, with his golden topknot!"

"Was he?" she replied vaguely, glancing in the mirror critically, and she replaced a hairpin to her better satisfaction.

"Yes, and a special pet of mine. It was sad for him, though he never appeared to feel it, living with his old grandmother, and then, when she died, living all alone in student's lodgings. He must love having his own bright home, and his nice bright wife there to welcome him after his busy day."

She made no reply.

"Isn't it so, Alma?"

"I suppose so," she answered, so laconically while suppressing a yawn that I knew in a flash

her mother must be right. "Don't you feel well?" she inquired.

"I didn't sleep very much last night, but I'm all right."

"Then you ought to lie down now and rest. I'll go. I have a friend coming in to tea."

"Teatime is a long way off—I'd rather talk. Your mother was here yesterday. She seems anxious about you."

"That's a novelty!" laughed Alma derisively. "She's never troubled herself very much about me except with regard to everything in the shape of forms and convention—chaperons, deportment, show of religion, and so forth. I don't call that having a mother; do you?"

"I think she's different of late. You see, when a mother has a married daughter there is naturally more sympathy—more—I don't think you quite understand what I mean."

"I'm afraid I don't. Years ago I could have loved her. I longed to love her, had she only let me."

"I'm sure, Alma, if ever you were in trouble and wanted womanly sympathy you would find it not lacking in your mother, if you were to turn to her now."

"Well, I don't mind telling you that she

would be the last person in the world I should ever dream of turning to."

Alma's face was not handsome now; it was vindictive, and a heavy frown showed the passion that lurked in her headstrong temperament.

"Alma," I said earnestly, "I hope you make Charlie happy. He deserves it, he's such a dear, good, unselfish fellow!"

"What makes you think I don't?" she asked aggressively. "Has he been complaining?" she added, as I didn't reply.

"Has he cause to?" I asked, looking steadily into her eyes.

"Find out!" She flung the two words at me passionately, rudely.

"It's not like you to talk to me in that way," I answered sadly, suppressing my astonishment. There was a long pause whilst she brooched together some lace that her brusque movement had torn.

"Did you invite me for this?" she asked, with blazing eyes.

"Yes."

For the moment she was too surprised to answer. I had become desperately anxious. "I'm too fond of both of you," I hastened to add, "to rest quiet if you and Charlie are not happy together."

"Your son is happy. I should have thought that was enough. I don't see what you want to interfere with us for."

"You know, Alma, that interfering is not one of my habits. Give me a plain answer to this —Is Charlie happy?"

"I suppose so," she replied petulantly, in scornful italics.

"And you? Alma, don't be silent—you see, I'm in a way responsible," I pleaded. "Tell me, dear, are you happy?"

"No, I'm not. There!" she buried her head in the sofa cushion, and burst into hysterical weeping. I went and sat next to her; she pushed me away, but when I put my arm round her neck she suffered me to draw her closer. I said nothing until her sobs came less frequently, and then she herself began:

"I've made a muddle of my whole life. I've had heaps of offers, but not the right one—in time."

"But I understood you broke off the engagement with my son because you loved Charlie, wasn't that true?" I asked, bewildered.

"Quite true, b—but——"

"But what?"

"There's a man who has been in love

with me for years, and who never came forward—if only I had known! And he loves me!"

"And do you mean to say he has come forward now?—Alma, dear, be frank with me. Let me see if a little sympathy and advice can't be of service to you now."

"Nothing can be of service to me now," she replied in a fury of disappointment, and as if she hardly knew what she said, she continued in a torrent of words: "I hate the world. I wish I was out of it. Charlie is sure to know all sooner or later, although he doesn't now. I don't care. I wish I were dead! I can't even bear to see his portrait on the writing-table smiling at me. I've shut up the case!"

"Alma!" I cried, horrified. My thoughts flew to Marcella's early life.

"I've tried to do away with myself in a way not to cause scandal and offend my mother—my mother!" Again there came the bitter laugh. "I've stood on the balcony and let the keen night air play on my bare chest, just when I was very hot, and prayed I might get fever or something and die from it. He loves me passionately, and I find I love him too. I can't live with Charlie any longer—to see him

is one constant reproach. I don't care any more what becomes of me."

"Isn't that very selfish? Can't you look higher and find comfort there?"

"In religion, do you mean?" she cried. "I'm giving up having any at all. I never had much; and as to going to heaven," she continued vehemently, laughing bitterly once more, "it seems to me that every one must go there who dies, simply because the world itself happens to be the—Other Place."

"That is one way of looking at it, certainly. You remember what Omar Khayyám says on the subject?" I replied, hoping to lead her into a calmer mood.

"I don't want to argue it. I don't care for anything or anybody. Oh, I'm so miserable—wretched—utterly, utterly wretched!" and she broke into violent sobs again.

I made her drink a little water, opened my scent-bottle and moistened her hot, throbbing temples. When she took my hand and kissed it, I wasn't slow to follow up my advantage. "Now tell me his name," I urged. It took a long time whilst I begged, coaxed, and entreated. Then she murmured so low that I only just caught the word:

"Harry."

"Harry who?"

"Harry Wallace. He has loved me ever since he first saw me."

I bounded up. "Harry Wallace has loved you ever since he first saw you? Really? Then why did he propose for Dulcie?"

It was her turn to bound up. Her face paled under the red blotches from crying as she exclaimed:

"I never heard that! Dulcie never told me. I don't believe it."

"Ask her," I replied coldly. "You understand that it would not be like Dulcie to flaunt a conquest, or to speak of it, as he formed one of our intimate circle—most unfortunately. Harry Wallace is merely a flirt; he always was—evidently an unscrupulous flirt and a worthless man."

I had given her a shock; it was necessary. I was thankful it was he, and that I was able to administer that cold douche. She tried to keep a brave front, and asked, "Then why didn't she marry him, eh?"

"Because she didn't care for him." Alma gave a scornful laugh—hurtful, and it jarred; she was sceptical evidently.

"You are right, perhaps, not to believe too

easily. But you remember Nurse Patrick?" I asked.

"Yes."

"He proposed to her when he knew she was engaged to her cousin."

"How can you know that?"

"Because I gave him the news of her engagement myself, and she told me afterwards that he had proposed to her. We compared notes, and his behaviour was revealed, for it was after he had seen me. I took the first opportunity of telling him what I thought of him, and I've not met him since. But I will see him if you empower me to; and, Alma, my poor darling, you will let me warn him to take himself away altogether?"

She clung to me, crying, and I knew I had won the day. "Pull yourself together, dear. Go home, and tell Charlie everything. I know he will think you've been sufficiently punished by all you have suffered. Be your own brave self. For you are brave, Alma. Be a good wife and Charlie will only love you all the more. It's the right thing, the only thing to do, and no shadow will remain between you. Have you really told me everything?" I added in sudden dread.

"Everything," she replied, in such a voice that I knew it was true.

"Then go home and do as I say."

"I can't tell him."

"Shall I?"

She kissed my hand again. I took her home myself.

When I told my son that I had seen Harry Wallace by appointment, and that he was thinking of leaving London in order to apply himself to some work in Australia instead of idling his time here, he burst out laughing. "What diabolical machinations have you been unearthing now to take such a step all by your dear little self? Because this sounds like your work, Mater."

"It's a private matter, dear; but I want you to oblige me and have nothing further to do with him. He quite understands he will not be welcome in our circle."

"He certainly is a bit wild—but—surely there's no real harm in him? He's not been offending you in any way, I hope?"

"Not me, personally, so I mustn't speak. But perhaps I know more to his detriment than you do. He is not a good friend, and you would not approve of him, if you knew."

"Well, I won't press you, in the circumstances."

"Then let the matter rest there. He is going away to make himself a position in Australia—that's the explanation, and I should think he would marry out there, as he has no ties here. There is plenty of good in him, I suppose, and this may be the turning point."

It was not very long before Mr. and Mrs. Lane dined with me, and a brighter couple it has seldom been my lot to entertain. Without having mentioned it, I had Mrs. Dryden there to meet them.

The quarter of an hour before dinner was certainly made frosty enough by her presence, although Charlie did his best to thaw it. To me the minutes were interesting through the growing surprise I detected on Mrs. Dryden's face, though she did her best to hide it. It began when she had said to Alma :

"We shall be having a family party in the country on the 5th of next month. Of course you will join us. I shall expect you by an early train, and to stay as long as you will."

"But, mamma! Charlie can't possibly leave town then."

"Perhaps you will join us later?" she said coldly, turning to him.

"You are very kind," replied Charlie briskly, but in the briskness there lurked a ring of

sarcasm. "I fear I could only get away too late to join your party, and I should not like to inconvenience you by turning up when you were longing again for town. The point is my being deserted."

"Deserted!"

"I couldn't possibly be there and Charlie left alone at home, mamma," said Alma.

Mrs. Dryden looked bewildered.

"I'm afraid I can't spare her," rejoined Charlie.

"Not to come to her own family?"

"No, mamma, of course he can't. I don't think that any of them would expect me to be there if my husband was not able to accompany me."

It now began to dawn upon Mrs. Dryden that her recent surmise must have been unfounded, and I certainly said nothing to enlighten her. She became unusually pleasant, and promised to send Charlie some of her '34 port—an amazing sign of satisfaction which made an unnecessarily deep impression on Charlie. But I know that the port went to him, all the same; for I soon had an opportunity of tasting it at his house a week later—only a quarter of a glass—just to taste.

CHAPTER XI

MAY BLOSSOM

SPRING again was in the air, and my parlour was gay with may blossom, which I had arranged in all the bowls and vases. Mr. Ryan always took pleasure in getting it for me when in season, as he knew my delight in my namesake flower. The little note on the table had informed me he would have brought it himself had he not been slightly ailing.

"A regular bower of sweetness," said my son, when he came in, looking round and sniffing the pleasant fragrance. "Reminds one of the scented air in Nice. Do you know, Mater, I think—oh, never mind——"

"But I do mind."

"Well, I think—Dulcie thinks too—I mean, wasn't it rather a mistake on your part——"

"I never make mistakes," I interrupted with mock seriousness; "but which particular one do you mean?"

"You know. Pa-in-law really is so very

lonely, and no longer takes the great interest in his work he used; he only chips up when we are all together in Wimbledon. Your life is dreadfully solitary—and, well, what I want you to know is that if you are thinking of us in the matter, Mater, *don't;* that's all I can say, so now it's out. Phew! You won't mind my having said so much?"

"My dear boy, I'm always glad to listen to your views, and I know you always mean kindly—but whether I agree with them is a very different matter; and in spite of the 'helplessness,'" I added, smiling, "you so often impress upon me as being afflicted with, for fear, I suppose, of my forgetting it, in spite of it I jog along fairly serenely. I had three years of happy married life," I added sadly, "only three years——"

"All right. Cheer up, Mater! Is that a new dress?"

"Yes, darling. Do you like it?"

"Suits you down to the ground. How am I to explain it to Dulcie? White bombazine trimmed with muslin and gold twiddles?"

"You can save yourself all that *expertise*. She has had a private view. Listen, before you go. You don't expect me, and Mr. Ryan, this week-end as usual, do you?"

"Better not. I'm not coming to town these next days—I don't like to leave Dulcie—so I'll send you a line every morning. How about MacDonald? You'd better pension him whilst he's here to enjoy it."

"We'll see next week; perhaps then I shall not miss him so much, eh?"

He laughed and kissed me even more affectionately than usual, as though to make up for the coming little separation.

During the next days an unusual idea dawned upon me and took possession of me. "I'm growing selfish," I kept repeating to myself, "living only for myself; even my own children say so. Look what Aunt Prue did for poor old Josef Blum, and she was much older than I am, devoting herself where she could do good, whilst here I sit and waste my years brooding on the past, and thinking myself most exemplary if only I show a cheerful face. I am not only growing selfish, I *am* selfish, and have been selfish for ever so long. That must be what the boy meant when he hinted; I never can seem to take a hint. Of course—" I took up the crochet I was doing for Aunt Prue to help the latest "most deserving case," and I crocheted those thoughts all round the woollen coverlet. After I had crocheted them

all round again, I put the work away, put my bonnet on the top of my whirling thoughts, and strolled out for a little air.

I was still so absorbed when I got to the cross-roads by the Square that I was nearly run over. I gathered my wits firmer together and entered the private hotel close by, and was ushered straight into Mr. Ryan's library.

He was sitting wrapped in his dressing-gown in the easy-chair near the open window. On the sill was a little bunch of may in a silver vase. His eyes were closed, and his face was worn and pale. He started up with pleasure on hearing me announced ; I begged he wouldn't move.

"It's Mrs. Mahomet and the Literary Mountain," I said in explanation, seating myself on the chair which he placed for me and drew forward.

"I don't know which of us could be taken for the Literary Mountain," he replied cheerfully, "but this is really very kind."

"I am anxious to know how you are to-day ; and as you are not able to come round and see me, which I miss very much, and as my boy remains at Wimbledon, I don't get enough bulletins, and I'm—I'm neglected."

"Neglected, are you ? No, you are not serious."

"I'm not serious, but I am neglected," I affirmed, smiling, "so I think I will pay you some afternoon visits in the morning, and this is the inaugural one." I was noticing his pale lips and haggard appearance, and wondered if he wasn't really *very* ill. "Are you feeling better to-day?"

"Much better now. I shall be all right soon. How kind of you to say you miss my coming. Am I really going to have this little treat daily? Why, I shall feel cheered for the remainder of each day."

"You poor old friend!"

"Have you ever been told how soothing your voice is?"

"Old Josef Blum used to say so. No one else that I remember, except—no, no one else."

"There is music in it, and it is peculiarly soft. I've always been sensitive to the quality of people's voices. How often it is that a woman's beauty is painfully bereft of charm when she opens her mouth and her tones are as raucous as a peacock's. Your cousin, Dr. Whyte, was commenting on that only yesterday."

"Is he going to keep you a prisoner here long?"

"About a week, he seems to think."

"May I bring my crochet with me to-morrow? Would it fidget you?"

"Nothing you do could ever fidget me. What a preposterous notion! Tell me, when are you going to write another volume of fairy stories?"

"Never. Why should I?"

"For the coming generation, of course."

"I think I might make myself more useful than that."

"How? Surely you don't contemplate indulging in any mad freak like your Aunt Prue? That's just how she began." He was looking so scared at his fancy that I hastened to reply:

"Oh no; I couldn't possibly leave my family with ties so very close."

"Ah!" he said, strangely relieved. "Why, we should all be utterly lost without you." We chatted for some time, and when I left we both felt considerably cheered.

The next morning I found Mr. Ryan decidedly better and dressed in his usual spruce fashion. While I crocheted he read to me from Dickens's "Christmas Carol"—a favourite with us, as with every one who has ever read it, or who is ever likely to read it. (I wonder if that's quite logical.) I had worked round and

round the coverlet, and as I rolled it up it struck noon, my hour to return.

"I shall look forward to to-morrow," he said gratefully, pressing my hand as I rose. How it came about I don't know, but I found myself seated again, and I heard myself saying impulsively:

"Oh, Mr. Ryan, I wish I could stay always to take care of you and nurse you well myself."

He bent towards me with a flush of joy, then resumed his position against the cushion; the smile faded, and he sighed heavily.

"But you couldn't stop here, my dear friend. Why, people might talk."

"I think I made a mistake," I murmured, and I began to cry. I would have given worlds not to; I turned my head away, hoping he wouldn't notice it. His hand was on my shoulder, which shook convulsively at the moment and betrayed me more than aught else could have done already.

"A mistake?" he repeated. "Oh yes; of course. You spoke on the impulse of the moment—I understand." For a moment he was occupied rearranging the papers on the table, which gave me an opportunity furtively to dry my eyes and turn towards him with my usual composure.

"I don't think, Mr. Ryan, that you do quite understand. It is—it is rather difficult to make myself clear. I find that I—that you—" I stopped in dismay at my clumsiness.

"Tell me frankly. We have been good friends too long that you should hesitate or feel confused; for it's many years since I arrogated to myself the position of your humble philosopher and friend."

He said it with so much earnestness that my diffidence suddenly vanished. "When I said 'I made a mistake' I meant that what I thought impossible when you spoke to me at Nice, I should now find a solace." I covered my face with my hand, it had got so flushed. The next moment when I looked up I caught sight of myself in the mirror, and I was ashy white; and I saw in it his face, too, so close to mine, looking at me with unutterable tenderness.

"Dearest of all women," he said, and my heart began thumping so it was almost painful, "then your answer to the dearest wish of my soul would be different now?"

"Yes."

"You would consent to be my wife?"

"Yes."

"You are sorry for me and my loneliness?"

"Yes, indeed."

"It really saddens you to see me ailing and alone?"

"Yes. Really."

"Do you love—" he checked himself. "What my life is, what it could be with you always at my side! But such happiness is not for me. I understand you, dearest, sweetest friend, better, perhaps, than you realise your own feelings." He paused, then resumed slowly and sadly, "You 'have loved and lost.' It would—it could only be a sacrifice."

"Oh, please——"

"If I were to challenge you — which I wouldn't," he replied gently, "you could not deny it. Believe me," he said, earnestly pressing my hand to his lips, "I am the prouder for knowing what you would do for my sake—for the sacrifice of sacred sentiment you are prepared to make; but my saint is in her niche and I must be content to worship at her shrine."

I was dismayed at the turn things had taken. "And now I've made you more wretched than before," was all I could say. It never occurred to me at the time to argue the matter—what he had said was so true. We both knew it was true, beyond challenge and beyond talk.

"More wretched? I assure you I'm prouder

and deeply grateful, and with a greater reverence than ever for your goodness and forbearance. Let me see you as often as you can, that is all I beg."

And we remained even firmer friends than of yore, if that were possible.

The next few days until Mr. Ryan got better and was able to go out my time was divided between him and Aunt Prue. "How are you getting on with the coverlet?" asked the latter.

"I've not only finished it, I've brought it with me. It wouldn't have been done so quickly if Mr. Ryan hadn't read to me while I sat with him and worked."

"Isn't he better yet, poor man? He looked very badly when you took me to see him last."

"He's better though, and out again for the first time to-day."

Aunt Prue had my entire confidence; she always had that. She proffered no advice; she knew I needed none. The coverlet for her "deserving case" was displayed and commended. Her deserving cases, I knew for a fact, generally turned out to be most *un*deserving cases. In more than one instance a waistcoat she had knitted and given to one of them was never worn, the man evidently preferring internal warmth to external, and on

the strength of it his wife had to bail him out "like a leaky boat." Had I told Aunt Prue what he had done, she would probably have said:

"Poor fellow! He must have done it to drown his sorrows. I will knit him another."

I really never saw such a worthless, ungrateful lot as were some of those whom Aunt Prue befriended. With all her experience she never seemed to see in all its hideous reality the seamy side of life. She would shut her eyes up tight to it and see nothing but the good in the world, and when she was imposed upon, as she frequently was, and hadn't shut her eyes quite quickly enough, out would come her "However!" and the incident would be abruptly closed. Aunt Prue now interrupted my cynical thoughts by remarking:

"Good news from Wimbledon?"

"Yes, but I'm hourly expecting better still. They know at home where I am if a telegram should arrive." When we were taking tea together in the cottage garden, for the weather was very mild that afternoon, Aunt Prue inquired of a sudden:

"Who's going to be godmother?"

"I know who ought to be."

"You, Dearie."

"Me!" I exclaimed (a "literary woman," too!). "Of course not. One venerable duty is quite enough for one small person."

"Don't let them ask *me*, Dearie. I don't approve of old godmothers; she should be a younger woman, a prop, able to help and direct through life—at least through the earlier years of it."

"I don't believe they can have the faintest idea of asking any one *but* you; and if it's a girl, she is to bear your name and mine."

"Then tell them my views gently, Dearie. My name they are welcome to, but for the duty as I see it, I am too much of a modern antique."

"As you wish it, I certainly will tell them; but I think you ought to suggest a proxy," I added, laughing; "and I don't see where you are to find one. Mr. Ryan is to be godfather, so for its own credit and renown our family has got to supply the godmother."

"Then there's only you, Dearie," coaxed Aunt Prue, "unless we forgive Barbara. I think she regrets her extraordinary slight of us, so that it would mean a reconciliation; and the infant might have to put up with three names."

At that moment the telegraph boy sauntered through the little gate. I tore open the yellow

envelope I had snatched from him, read the telegram to Aunt Prue, quickly took leave of her, and hurried into the victoria.

"To Wimbledon! Quickly, please!" I ordered. Yet never did any distance appear to me so long.

CHAPTER XII

ERIC

My dearest wish was gratified. The white bassinette was tenanted, and whenever little Eric set up a lusty cry from its billowy depths, the yellow canary in its gilt cage piped away in chorus. Alex was his second name, and Mr. Ryan supported me nobly in my adoration of our grandson. Aunt Prue attended the little festive gathering. Her suggestion had been accepted—Barbara had come over from abroad on a flying visit specially to be present as godmother. The event had thus brought about a pleasant reconciliation, quite unexpectedly. Though deep down in my mind I had a suspicion it was all a deeply hatched plot on Aunt Prue's part, brooded over for some time past, and for her quite ingeniously worked.

When Aunt Prue first took the sleeping infant in her arms she exclaimed, "My word! who'd have thought I should live to see Dearie's grandbaby!" The appellation was hailed with

delight, and in our little circle it became a pet term—"Dearie's grandbaby."

The moment was now opportune for parting with MacDonald. He was duly pensioned and took up his abode at the stables, there to lead a restful and epicurean existence. The parting was not so painful in the new circumstances, and he was still to go out driving with me as usual.

When the time came for Eric's first social appearances in public I took him all alone to pay a visit to Aunt Prue. What a delightful drive in the victoria that was for me! He slept in my arms all the way, while I watched and gloated over his tiny features, holding one wee hand in mine, and MacDonald slumbered at my feet. When we arrived at the cottage, Lambert received the white silk bundle with a chuckle of joy and admiration, and I thought Aunt Prue never looked better or more beaming. After tea she and I walked slowly arm-in-arm round the sweet-scented garden.

The air was full of fragrancy, and Aunt Prue with great pride drew my attention to her pear trees with their pinky buds and full blossoms; to the undergrowth of primrose and moss, and to the few late daffodils. She made me gather some of the pansies that Dulcie loved to have,

but I positively refused to touch the wall-flowers and forget-me-nots she herself was so fond of; for when they were in flower a bowl of each always decorated her dining-table. After I had duly admired her treasures, her face became wreathed in smiles again as she drew me to a bench, saying:

"And now, Dearie, I have something to tell you, so you cannot go yet, for I have kept it till the end and I can't keep it to myself any longer."

"Something very nice, I can see," I replied. "One of your cases has turned out particularly well?" I ventured, stopping myself in time from adding "for once."

"No, it's not about poor people at all."

What she told me only detained me a few minutes, because I was not allowed to argue it, and I hurried home with Eric, having important news to impart.

When I took the son and heir into Dulcie's room and deposited him, bonnet and all, into his mother's arms, she was lying on the sofa the picture of pretty young motherhood, and my son was sitting contentedly beside her.

"Did you have a pleasant drive?" he asked.

"Did he cry?" inquired Dulcie.

"He was as good as gold the whole time, and

has had enough admiration to turn his little noddle. He has had a present."

"Who from?—Have you been buying *more* things?" they asked simultaneously.

"Eric has had a present from Aunt Prue. Keep calm, Dulcie, for it's a very big present indeed. Aunt Prue has firmly and unalterably decided to make over at once to Eric practically the whole of the £30,000 legacy old Mr. Josef Blum left her."

They rather gasped in the suddenness of their surprise.

"Don't interrupt me; let me tell you in my own way. She wished that it should be I to announce to you her decision. It greatly astonished *me* when she spoke to me about it as we sat near the flowers. She said, 'That's what I've been waiting for all this time—and thankful I am that it has happened during my lifetime. On the day grandbaby was born I set my plan in motion; and to-day I have signed the deed of settlement.' I was overwhelmed, but she wouldn't allow me to express anything. She stopped me by saying, 'Hush! There's nothing further to be said. I want for nothing. It is my wish and my wish is law—especially as it is now legalised,' she added, with the old humorous twinkle in her eye, and we both

laughed. What Aunt Prue wants is a simple acknowledgment of acceptance on behalf of Eric, and strictly not of thanks, under pain of displeasure. She laughed as she said, 'Beg dear Dulcie to send him to see me whenever convenient, as the distance tries my brittle old bones now more than it can possibly try his supple young ones.'"

So Eric's future was handsomely assured. I wonder did the kind old miser ever imagine which way his gift would drift! Sometimes I fancy he may have done so, for it was his way to reckon far ahead. Aunt Prue was ever tactful, and revelled in the idea that a new-born babe must submit to a deed of gift without demur and without argument. I am sure no one felt happier over it than she. The advent was an immense joy to her; she was never tired of talking about my grandbaby. Neither was I.

Eric really developed into one of the beautifulest children ever seen. I cannot deny that the lovely fair curls and fresh complexion came from his mother's side of the family, but the dark brown eyes were his father's, though they peeped out more roguishly than his ever did. His disposition in due time showed itself gayer, not so thoughtful or so depend-upon-able—just

ERIC

a handsome, bright, tender-hearted tomboy, and so not difficult to manage in spite of being somewhat of "a handful."

When he was able to toddle amongst the flowers in the cottage garden, holding on to Aunt Prue's ample skirt and chattering away not very distinctly, we came across a mangey cat, one of Aunt Prue's *bêtes noires*, prowling amongst the geraniums and mewing piteously.

"Poor pussy!" exclaimed the child.

"It's hungry, I expect," said Aunt Prue.

"Grand-auntie, give poor 'ungry pussy a penny," he pleaded.

"I'm afraid, lovey, a penny would only give poor pussy a pain inside," replied Aunt Prue, laughing. "I expect Lambert will want to give it 'a little bread and butter' presently."

"No. Give it some nice milk." And this was done to please him.

"And may I come to-morrow-day and see poor pussy?"

I noticed that she was only too delighted at the idea of another visit so soon. She readily acceded, although she hated harbouring the arch enemy—but in any case Eric's wish brooked no argument. So "poor pussy" became a permanent member of the cottage household, and I pitied Aunt Prue whilst

admiring her devotion and sympathising with the animal.

"The child likes the creature," she would reply; "it *will* trample on the geraniums—However!" I tried to coax away Eric's deep affection for the really horrid-looking vagrant, or to make him forget it, but to no purpose. Grand-auntie and the cat were immovably inseparable in his infantile mind.

Several happy years passed evenly and peacefully.

I looked round the cosy parlour of my flat, which seemed all the cosier for the snow outside heaping itself high upon the window-sill; and I sighed as I drew my arm-chair nearer to the fire. It was growing dark.

There was a sudden noise. The door burst open, and a little flying figure, all pinafore, golden curls, flaming cheeks, extended arms, and scampering legs, shaking so with laughter as to impede his speed, flung himself on to my lap, and clasped me round the neck. Out of breath and blowing into my ear, he whispered excitedly:

"Gran! hold me tight, Gran! Pertend I'm asleep!"

And my son, whose fairy footsteps stamped

audibly as they hurried along, entered the door of communication.

"Where's that young rogue?" he said. "Ah!" contemplating us both with satisfaction. "Now he knows perfectly well that it's past bedtime. He coaxes his mother, who allows him an extra half-hour; and then, when I call out 'Time!' I'm obliged to chase him out; after which I see him flying along the passage in to you. Halloa! why, he's smiling in his sleep! Come along, scamp! Outside! Your grandmother has a stony heart, and knows you ought to be in bed. He's spoiling your lace, too."

Little Eric opened his merry blue eyes, and unclasped his hands, which he contemplated as though he had never seen them before. Certainly they were very grimy after his evening's romp. Satisfied that they were his, he placed them tightly round my neck frill again. What did my lace matter when my little treasure was nestling in my arms?

Putting his face against mine he whispered, coaxingly:

"Quick! Tell me a story, Gran! Never mind your son."

"Never mind your son!" exclaimed his father. "'Pon my word!"

"I want to keep him just a little while," I pleaded.

"Of course you do," replied the outraged parent, with mock vexation. "I'm glad you never spoilt *me* like that—my health might have suffered."

"You forget," I answered, smiling.

My son withdrew, laughing and shaking his fist at Eric, who sat up triumphant and shook his back at him, gave me an affectionate wet kiss as token of gratitude, then patted my hair with those dear little black paws.

"Now, what shall it be?" I asked. "Violet and the Doll-Fairy?"

"No, sanks."

"The Witch and the Jewelled Eggs?"

"No, sanks."

"Littledom Castle?"

"No, sanks; none of those."

"Then what is it to be?"

"I know them and all the others. I want a real story out of your head, Gran."

"They are all out of my head, dear."

"Oh no," he answered reproachfully; "they are out of the ink-pot. Father told me he saw you write them down!"

I laughed. I didn't argue the point—he was so sure. When can one be sure, if not at six

years old? So I asked for a few moments to think of one that hadn't come out of the ink-pot, during which time he swung his legs in contentment.

"Let's call it 'The Babes in St. James's Park,' shall we, Eric?"

He nodded. Then he settled down comfortably in my lap.

"More than forty years ago, a little boy and girl about your age were very fond of one another."

"What's his name and what's her name?" inquired Eric stolidly.

"Oh, you're too grown-up to interrupt, are you not?"

"Yes," replied my grandson doubtfully.

"I'll tell you presently. Well, she was on a visit at his house, and they were together all and every day. They became playmates and sweethearts. The next week he asked if she would marry him, and she replied that she would. After that he always called her 'my wifie,' and was annoyed when people smiled. As no one would believe they were in earnest, they decided that it would be wise to run away together.

"So one very warm summer's evening they ran away, and never stopped till they got to

St. James's Park. They clambered across the moored boats, and climbed up the steep bank of the island which was to be their hidden home.

"The moon shone out. The water shone back diamonds, and the stars twinkled diamonds, and the tiny bead-ring which was gravely thrust upon the bride's finger sparkled like diamonds, too. The little couple roamed proudly about their estate, and laughed to think that the clocks that chimed the hour of ten were clanging their wedding bells. And then they ate their wedding feast of cake out of a paper bag. Then, lying down with an arm round one another's neck, they fell sound asleep.

"The park-keepers found them, and carried them gently, still asleep, to their dear ones who had been searching for them.

"Next morning, to their surprise, they awoke and rubbed their eyes to find themselves in their own beds. They were not scolded, for they promised to be very patient, and wait to get married until they were more grown up. And although they didn't wait so very, very long, they did grow up, and were really married, and were so very happy for as long as he—as they lived."

"Sanks ; very pretty," exclaimed Eric. "But what was her name ?"

I hesitated.

"Her name, dear ? Her name was—Gran."

"Couldn't be," he replied flatly. "And his ?"

"His ? The—the same as your father's," and I sighed.

"How funny ! Gran," confided Eric, "when I call father 'Percy' he calls me 'rascal'—and that always begins a pillow-fight," and Eric bubbled over with glee at the recollection, which he accompanied by such an upheaval of his legs that it nearly bounced him out of my lap. Then he looked up at me. "Why, Gran, you're tired before me. Your eyes are all sleepy ! Dustman's come !" and Eric yawned himself at the thought.

Except for the glow of the fire, the room had grown quite dark. Except for the child's breathing, all was still. The boy's head had fallen on my breast—he was asleep. I laid my cheek against his little hot face, and folded my arms closer around him. It seemed to me that I was young again—that my son was little once more, and lay softly in his mother's arms.

CHAPTER XIII

WIDOW AND WIDOWER

"WHAT is the matter?" asked my cousin, Dr. Lawrence Whyte, entering my parlour. "I had such an urgent message. Nothing much, I hope?"

"There's nothing the matter with me. I sent for you as I'm in an extremely anxious condition. I am suddenly told to-day at the hotel that Mr. Ryan is too ill to see any one, and that his valet cannot leave him. What does it mean?"

"It's quite true."

"Why, whatever is it? Lawrence, do tell me quickly," I added, as my cousin hesitated.

"I know Mr. Ryan would rather the matter did not get about, and in my professional capacity I really——"

"Oh, Lawrence," I protested, "I'm such an old friend and neighbour of his."

He looked curiously on at my growing agitation, still hesitating. He was not a

sympathetic man—at least not to me. Barbara told me years ago that he had cared for me, but I never believed it. I remembered him always the same, and I never liked him. It was only out of family feeling that I appointed him, rather than a stranger, to be my medical adviser when our dear Sir Alan deserted us all, and my little circle followed my example. I felt displeased at his attitude now. His tall, spare figure, as he stood there, had never struck me before as looking so—well, so uncanny, with his thin, freckled face, and thin, sandy hair and moustache, and his light eyes that gazed at my distress from under their sandy lashes with cold apathy.

"I think you might understand, Lawrence, that this suspense is positively cruel."

"Well, the fact is that Mr. Ryan is suffering from an internal malady that is incurable."

"Oh dear!" I cried. "Yes. Sit down. Serious?"

He took a chair, and looked at his watch. "Yes."

"Tell me, Lawrence. Is it hopeless?—in confidence. I *must* know."

"Yes."

"Does he know it?"

"Yes."

"Long?"

"Yes."

I said nothing. It was he who went on:

"I wish now I hadn't told you. You are sure to betray yourself. Women always do. And he is most anxious his daughter should know nothing of the facts, even that her husband should have no inkling."

I was so shocked at the news that I had to ask him to repeat what he said.

"For Dulcie's sake—of course—I understand—" I stammered.

"Yes, in the delicate condition she now is, it is highly important. Her health is very fragile, very different to what it was before Eric was born, as you have yourself remarked." He took out his watch again. "I must go. I thought you were in urgent need of me. I have a patient who is suffering a good deal, and I ought to be there instead of here."

"Only just one moment. Is poor Mr. Ryan resigned to his fate?"

"He takes it cheerfully."

"Did he insist upon knowing?"

"Of course. We doctors are not accustomed to babble out these matters."

"Has he a good nurse?"

"I'm sending one."

"*Do* let me write for Nurse Patrick."

Again he stared at me as though my concern appeared strange to him.

"Very well—and remember, not a sign betraying your knowledge."

"I will be careful."

"Good-bye. Oh—er—there is a possibility of my being summoned down to Hampshire. You won't mind my partner taking my place?"

"You know I don't like him, Lawrence. Old Dr. Rufford said at any time, if necessary——"

"Just as you please," said my cousin coldly. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye. I'm sorry I kept you so long."

How I missed Sir Alan at this time of trial, when my knowledge of the facts had to be kept so secret! In him alone could I have found comfort. I locked myself in my room, and even Eric couldn't coax me out.

Nurse Patrick was in attendance on my poor friend; that was all I could do for him, and he was grateful for her skilled care. She kept me fully informed. The doctor insisted on his being kept so quiet that he was allowed to see no one. She wrote me that he repeatedly kept inquiring after us all, sending us messages

that he was better, and hoping to see us soon ; especially he enjoined :

"Don't let Dulcie know. She mustn't even suspect that I am bedridden. The poor child must have no anxiety at present."

And Dulcie wondered why he didn't call, and I listened while my son, who didn't know what I did, laughed and made light of it, making some excuse, and joking about her father's absence. Joking! And I had to smile at the joke and make merry, or Dulcie would assert positively that I was ailing: "You look so pale," she had said more than once.

"It isn't what one looks, Dulcie ; it is what one feels, and at present I am particularly strong for me. When you are trotting about vigorously again, well — " I paused, for I shrank day by day from thinking of the future.

"Do you know, Mater," said Dulcie, who had adopted that term from my son — she evidently hadn't noticed my sudden embarrassment—"that Alma and Charlie are quarrelling ?"

"Quarrelling !" I repeated in alarm.

"Yes," she rejoined, smiling ; "they are quarrelling over the name they shall give their little daughter."

"That's not very usual over a first-born.

They've had long enough, too, for discussion, one would think. The only similar instance I know of was in my mother's family. For years the couple quarrelled as to whether, when a child was born to them, it should or it should not be called Joseph or Josephine, and they died childless after all."

Dulcie laughed. "When you were out the other day, Charlie came across to our flat to tell us the news, and he wants to call her after you."

"Oh, this naming business!" I exclaimed, with mock tragedy. "Well?"

"Well, to speak plainly, Alma loves the name of 'Viva,' and Mrs. Dryden considers the child should be called Georgina, after her. Alma rebels against Georgina."

"Why not choose all three, which is the usual way out of it?"

"Because Alma won't; and Charlie says he cannot take it upon himself to refuse her mother."

"I should think they'll give Alma a fever between them, with her passionate nature," I prophesied.

"Charlie says he wishes you would call soon. And then, Mater, there's another aspect to the case — *most* important: you know *our* views

about your dear name and—and that we have copyrighted it, morally." She said it so sweetly and with such a winning smile. Dulcie has always seemed to me as though she must be a lovely princess out of a fairy tale, and it struck me more than ever that there was something spiritual about her gentleness. "Will you tell them, Mater?"

"Certainly I will."

"Father is coming to-day, so I could spare you this afternoon." I gave a little shudder, but did not look up. I said:

"Eric asked if he might bring his soldiers here and have tea with you? He seems to feel he is not with you as much as usual, and with his soldiers he is sure to keep quiet."

It was arranged as I planned, and I left the two quietly happy together. Although I went about my occupations as usual, my thoughts were all the time elsewhere, and I didn't dare give way to my distress and anxiety. Nerves of iron are needed in this world; fortunate indeed and greatly to be envied are they who possess them! They lose many of the sweets of life, but are spared more of its bitterness.

I had a fairly good bulletin from the valet when I called at the hotel, and left some flowers on my way to the Lanes' house in the west end.

Widow and Widower

They lived in one of those formal high London houses which, to my mind, embody every discomfort that money can buy for a fair rental. By which I mean, heavily draped depressing rooms, not too much light anywhere; and stairs enough to toil up and take away your breath, and keep you out of breath long after you have reached the best bedroom, which couldn't by any means be situated anywhere but over the stereotyped lofty London front drawing-room of middle-class gentility —a middle-class brought up to think no other sort of gentility conveniently possible. If I were to live in such dismally prosaic surroundings, with my boudoir at the back, and drooping, air-confined greenery behind glass in place of a window which, but for these plants in jail, would look upon a blank wall, I think that even no amount of philosophic resignation would keep me from being straightway removed to one of our necessary public institutions.

I sat gasping from the unaccustomed journey up the stairs, pretending I wasn't. I had taken a place next to Alma, and Mrs. Dryden sat and surveyed me from the other side of the bed. She made me feel, as usual, that she didn't approve of what I was wearing, by her

unblinking stare at everything visible in succession, beginning, as was her wont, with the gear on my head and ending with that on my feet ; but the latter she couldn't see now. Yet I heard she was always endeavouring to get to know who were the purveyors of those very articles, and complaining of her own dressmaker, milliner, and shoemaker, inquiring of Dulcie, never of me ; but we kept our counsel well, for we two were sworn to that most sacred of feminine freemasonry—the sanctity of the source of our female attire. Mrs. Dryden, having finished her survey while murmuring some formal words of greeting, looked longingly at the infant lying so cosily under the bedclothes on Alma's arm, with its healthy, little pink face peeping out of the headshawl.

"What a precious bit of humanity!" I exclaimed. So its grandmother evidently thought, though she sat stiffly there and no word of endearment escaped her lips. Indeed, such words would have sounded incongruous coming from them. She gave me the impression that she was afraid of her daughter and was altogether ill at ease, perhaps the more as Alma treated her just as usual, with a deferential politeness that ignored the new feelings which had been growing in her mother's breast, and which I

could see were ready to gush forth with the slightest encouragement. Whatever change was wrought in Alma herself it was concentrated on her offspring only ; and it didn't seem to occur to her that there was just such another love which had budded at last, and was hungrily awaiting her if only she would forget the past and realise she had a sympathetic mother in Mrs. Dryden.

I couldn't blame the girl, though I felt more than sorry for Mrs. Dryden, sitting with that painful longing look in her eyes, watching the pair lying there, full of pride and yearning to take the child and press it to her heart, but so constrained and awkward that she dare not ask —yearning for a word of affection, and treated like a stranger ! She talked softly and kindly, trying to engender some sympathetic response, but it had been too effectually choked in long years of repression and neglect. The seeds must be sown, carefully sown and tended, if they are to be reaped. Alma was frankly, innocently unconscious of all this pathetic manœuvring, and dropped for her mother not the very smallest grain of the wealth of love she was showering in endearing terms on her own little daughter, accompanied by that look of protective gloating maternity that seems to emanate from a higher sphere than our own.

Then I could no longer restrain the impulse. I bent over the bed and softly took the child up. I felt the two women's eyes upon me as I walked round and placed it in Mrs. Dryden's arms.

"Alma wants you to nurse her," I said, "but didn't like to suggest it first." I am telling the plain truth when I say that as I looked into Mrs. Dryden's face I thought another being was before me—a face all smiles, all gratitude. She could say nothing, but look from me to the baby, and from the baby to her daughter.

"Alma dear!" was all she could say. Alma in happiness and surprise—a surprise I could see that brought a look of pain to her face for a flash—put out her arms and her mother moved towards her. I went to the window to make sure what the weather was.

"Did Dulcie tell you," asked Alma, smiling, when I resumed my seat, "that Charlie and I have been quarrelling?"

"Why?" asked Mrs. Dryden, in surprise. I only gave a little nod of assent. At that moment a tap came at the dressing-room door, so she rose and went to see what it was.

"Then you know that Charlie wants one name and I want another."

"You must tell him, Alma dear, that so far as my name is concerned my son seems to think he

possesses a certain claim to copyright in it," I replied pointedly and laughing.

"I understand," she answered. "I think in the circumstances he is quite right, and so of course will Charlie. Is Dulcie any better? Will she be able to come and see what I have to show her here?"

"She isn't at all strong now. Perhaps later she—" Mrs. Dryden came back into the room and beckoned to me. I kissed Alma and her child and withdrew.

On the landing I found Williams, Mr. Ryan's valet, who had been to my flat and followed me on, and would I please come at once; Mr. Ryan was asking for me. To my dismay the good fellow was perfectly blanched. I asked him to see me to the carriage, to ride back on the box, and to tell the coachman I should not be nervous if he drove very quickly.

My brain was in such an excited state that all objects passed stood out before my vision with remarkable intensity—much as a distant landscape is clearer in its details under certain atmospheric conditions. I remember that, but I don't remember entering the hotel, though I call to mind Nurse Patrick gently turning the handle of the invalid's door and as gently closing it behind me.

The simplicity of the room struck me—the delicate green walls with a few engravings hung upon them, the lace-curtained windows, the refined furniture—I saw it all in a flash, and all was so quiet that it seemed uninhabited. In the corner was a brass bedstead. I approached. My poor friend lay there, so changed. His hair and beard were white. He turned his eyes towards me and they smiled a recognition. He was dying. I realised it, and he knew I had realised it. I knelt down beside him, and his hand rested on my shoulder. Then he raised my face, scanning it with eyes from which the wonted piercing intensity had entirely vanished ; eyes now lustreless and full of pain, as strange as though I had never seen them before. He said, scarcely above a whisper :

"Thank God, you have come!"

I hid my face in the coverlet ; I couldn't speak a word ; there was like an iron band pressing round my throat.

"Let me see your dear features — every moment is precious."

I looked up. His hands were feebly stretched out towards me, and I took them in mine. His pallor was extreme.

"You and I alone," he muttered and rambled on, "no one else to come. The only woman I

ever—revered—I have ever loved. So very weary — ready." After a silence that seemed an hour, he said, "Dulcie mustn't know—till after her baby is born. Promise?"

I promised with a pressure of the hand.

"God bless my child and—your son!" There was another pause. His eyes never left my face. Our hands remained intertwined. Then he raised his head slightly, and said with startling distinctness in the old tender tones I well remembered:

"Heaven bless you, Dearie!" He raised my hand nearly to his lips when his own dropped heavily. His head rested again on the pillow and a greenish pallor came stealing over his dear face. A giddiness seized me.

Some time must have elapsed, for the thin hands I held in mine were growing cold, quite cold. "There were three doctors here this morning," said Nurse Patrick, in a subdued, agitated voice, as she busied herself about. "They never imagined the end was so near."

"I am sure he knew it," I whispered. She didn't reply, she saw I was at prayer. Then I rose stiffly. She took my arm and pressed it affectionately and led me outside, where she gave some hasty directions, and insisted upon

accompanying me home. On our way downstairs we passed his valet, who mutely asked for news. Our silence was his answer, and he took it so.

The pavements were wet, and a cold November mist was falling as we returned to my home. As the lift wasn't working, we had to walk upstairs. I opened the door with my latchkey, and I sat down in my parlour with the feeling of being a stranger there. I was as though turned to stone—quite numb ; and my eyes felt as though they had never shed a tear, nor ever could. Nurse Patrick began to rub my cold hands, but I begged she would go back, as she would be wanted ; and she left me, promising that she would give directions I was not to be disturbed, and undertaking herself to communicate at once with my son, to intercept his return home and break the sad news.

Only now did I realise to the full extent all I had lost in this dear friend. His many kindnesses, his care, his sympathy, his acts of most unselfish and rare devotion came crowding to my brain. Friendship can indeed go no higher than that of a man for the woman whom he places in a shrine, there to be regarded as a saint to be worshipped. Life has its many compensations, but nothing in this world could

ever fill the gap of the loss to me of such a friend.

When I was only twenty-one, my grief gushed forth as it does in all the passion of a youthful sorrow. Now I had lost my lifelong friend, I was a woman getting old in years, and my eyes remained dry whilst my heart ached in a silent agony as only those hearts can ache when grief bleaches the colour from the hair. Little could he guess, when he used to marvel at the absence of grey hairs, that it would be his own loss which would bring with magic swiftness those silver streaks in heavy masses about my temples.

I wore my gay dresses in spite of the mourning in my heart, and I spent nearly all my time in Dulcie's flat, looking after her household and sitting with her until her husband returned home. He and I kept our secret with the greatest difficulty, and Dulcie's fretting to see her father was painful to witness. She now believed that rheumatism had crippled his hand so that he could not write, and that he might not go out. I would take the opportunity to borrow Eric for an hour before he went to bed so as to have him all to myself, and his bright chatter and boyish ways vividly brought back the past to memory. He knew Gran was his slave, and Grand-auntie was even more easily subjugated

to his whims ; and we smiled when we noticed the extent to which he took advantage of us. But he was a well-mannered and affectionate child, and so handsome ! After all, Aunt Prue and I had lived long enough to know that wise indulgence in a child's surroundings do no harm but bring an exhilarating independence that tends to invigorate and enlarge the character. Constant criticism and sternness without the wholesome counteraction of a fond grandparent are not so conducive to a happy development.

But Eric was having a fine time just now, because he was actually on a visit to Aunt Prue, with Lambert as bodyguard. He ruled Lambert with a rod of iron. If any tricks were to be played upon any one, Lambert was his invariable choice. I believe he used to concoct these tricks in our flat and then wait to let them off at Highgate, for they were generally so ingenious and were let off with such swiftness and neatness of execution. But he knew he had only to put his arms round her neck and say he was "sorry for vexing the poor old Lamb," for her to forget all about it and set to making him toffee. I'm not sure that in most cases toffee was not the ultimate objective of much of his mischief.

We were consequently very quiet at home.

Dulcie was ailing more than usual and had slept so badly that she lay this special afternoon on the sofa in her bedroom and fell into a sound, refreshing sleep. My son had decided not to go out that day, so I took advantage of the circumstances to take some things to Highgate for Eric and spend a little time with him and Aunt Prue before doing some shopping for Dulcie. I also took pleasure in purchasing a lace-trimmed infant's pelisse, which was to be my little gift. Thus it was quite late when I returned.

Upon my dressing-table I found a note in my son's handwriting, hastily scrawled some hours before, for he had noted the time. I read it twice over; the words were few, yet they meant so much:

"Hurrah! Come at once and see our little daughter. Don't wait to take your bonnet off."

My face flushed with joy, so unaccustomed to joy of late. I didn't wait a moment. I hurried across to their flat, rang the bell and impatiently waited. I rang again—no doubt they must all be busy. After a third time the maid opened the door, looking scared, but of course I understood that their time was fully occupied. The whole place was nice and quiet, just as it should be, I thought. There was no

one in the drawing-room. I entered my son's study; it was all dark there. I was leaving it when his voice suddenly made me jump so much it startled me:

"Mater, stay here!" The words were peremptory, and the voice sounded strange and grating. But I didn't stop nor wait to think what it could mean. I said nothing, but went softly along the passage and very softly into Dulcie's room, which was dimly lighted. A nurse was sitting near the lamp.

I glanced at the bed—and there I stood and stared at it; for the sheet was drawn right over it, and under the sheet—O merciful God! —under the sheet I could discern the outlined form of our darling lying quite still, and beside her lay something quite small, quite still.

"My poor boy!" My brain could only form those three words as with trembling limbs I made my way back to him, to the room all dark, where he sat motionless. The window was uncurtained, and some stars were shining. After a moment I could distinguish him crouched on the sofa. "My poor boy!" I put my arm round his neck and he suffered it to remain.

Several times the maid came to the door and gently tapped, and, getting no answer, went away again. And there I sat, holding him in

my arms. Our anguish was unutterable, indescribable. At last from sheer exhaustion he dropped asleep, and I slipped quietly away.

Lying there in the moonlight so peacefully at rest with her little one lying on her arm she wore that sweet spiritual expression I had last noticed—now too beautiful for mortal eyes to see. I blessed her dear memory as I kissed her, and I prayed God to help my son in his hour of grief. I had suffered so much in my life. But he! Stricken like this in his moment of joy!

Aunt Prue didn't bear these heavy troubles well. Yet, for her, as for most old people, time seems to do much in blunting the sharp edge of the blade of sorrow. It is foolishly called the selfishness of old age; but it comes from sad experience. They are able still to think life worth the living, though trouble be one of its contingencies. So although dear Aunt Prue now fully looked her age, and kept on repeating "Poor Dearie—However!" with a dreary monotony that was unnerving, still I could get her on to brighter topics and she was able to forget. Oh, to be able to forget!

Eric was not allowed to return to our saddened home at present; he remained with Aunt Prue, and was gently told why he would

never see his mother again. Aunt Prue did wonders for him in the matter of comfort, and it did her good at the same time. And then an invitation came to Eric to visit "Aunt Barbara," as she wished him to style her, in her home in Austria, and as Aunt Prue thought it would be wise to accept her kindness until our plans were more settled, and his father raised no objection, of course I had no objection either, especially as Eric was very keen on going in a ship to discover foreign parts. He insisted that he would go in a ship all the way to Austria. He was full of the idea, and the preparations for his journey, and placing him in the care of a lady friend who would take him to his destination, came as a distraction to us all. As Eric considered that at eight years old he ought to be allowed to travel alone, we agreed together that the lady friend should be in his care, and he volunteered that he would behave like a grown-up, and pay every attention to his companion's comfort. He carried out his promise, too.

All my suffering, present and past, was epitomised in the bereavement of my son. I believe that the sight of his pale, sad face would nearly have killed me, but the fortitude I never thought myself to possess came to my aid.

"What should I do without you, Mater—now!—or ever!"

I smiled gratefully as I replied:

"I know you have quite enough grit to fight your way through your sorrow without me—and I'm proud of you—and may Eric prove himself as worthy as his father in everything! . . . Oh, call it maternal pride, if you like—and let every mother have that pride if only she has a son who can instil it!"

While Eric was still abroad we intended to move to a villa we knew of close to Aunt Prue's cottage, where he and I and our bit of sunshine would live together; and, later on, Eric should go to Harrow and would spend all holidays with us. I looked forward to the new surroundings for the sake of my son, though I knew that out of sight could never mean out of memory to him, and I doubted if Time would ever do more for him than it had done for me.

Aunt Prue was greatly cheered by this decision of ours to live near to her, and she beamed like her own self again. My son's time when he was not at work was thus completely taken up seeing to our affairs and to our new life; for we were now widow and widower.

CHAPTER XIV

IN THE FUTURE

It took a little time to settle in our new house, but it didn't seem like home until Eric returned from abroad. What with his new surroundings to examine and comment upon, and all his recent experiences to impart, he was as joyous a little personality as could be wished. At first he would talk of his mother and sob, but only when he and I were alone; for he soon found his father unwilling to talk on the subject—just an embrace and then another topic of conversation. I, too, would gradually get his mind on to other subjects, and we would wind up by discussing how his next birthday should be celebrated, and when that was threadbare, what should be the programme for the next after that. The range was wide and taste unstable.

"I say, Gran," was his opening, the morning after he returned, "there's such a funny old lady living at Aunt Barbara's, not a bit like you."

"Where's the difference, Eric?" asked his father. "Has she got two heads?"

"No," replied Eric seriously. "She's got one head, but it's very ugly; and she eats such a lot and is so fat; and she's got heaps of light brown curls, which Gran hasn't; and a red face; and her teeth move so funny. I don't know what she talked about 'cos she doesn't talk English. But I didn't like her, 'cos she made Aunt Barbara cry."

"I wonder why?" I asked, concerned.

"And Uncle Barbara?" interrupted my son facetiously, "is he like his mother?"

"No; he's very quiet. He can't take milk."

"Doesn't it agree with him?"

"I don't know, Gran. When I asked him, he told me he was obliged to take port wine when he was thirsty, and he was afraid to take milk on top."

"I heard from Lawrence Whyte," whispered my son to me, "that his brother-in-law was a thirsty subject."

"What does Aunt Barbara do all day?" I inquired.

"Oh, nothing much. She spends a lot of money in the shops, and she and I went to the circus, and the clown fell down right over

the dinner-tray with all the vegetables and things."

Eric chuckled so at the recollection that we caught the infection.

"Well, old chap, go ahead," urged his father after a time.

"We went driving in the Prater very quickly indeed ; saw pictures and things—I must show you the musical-box she bought me, and—oh, I do think this place far jollier than anything, and I am so jolly glad I'm going to a school. How's Grand-auntie ?"

"She's longing to see you, dear, so you must go and find out," I replied, rising from table, and we adjourned to the morning-room bright with fresh white paint, new rosewood furniture, and gay flower-designed wall-paper. The verandah covered with wisteria steps led down to our garden. We were on the point of going out to enjoy a little of its freshness, as we generally did at this hour, when all at once up those steps and into our room walked Sir Alan Charleston, Marcella, and two sturdy boys. They all laughed like children at our astonishment, and I could hardly believe my senses. There they were, and, what was better still, was the fact that there they would often be, for they had returned to London to live in the old house

in Harley Street, where Sir Alan was again to resume his practice. Marcella's health was entirely restored, their exile was over, and their sunburnt lads had come to make acquaintance with the great grey city. My son and I were overjoyed to hear it.

After Marcella had told me of their news and plans, I inquired after Madame Paul Anatole Baptiste.

"Oh, Clairette is doing very well," she replied, as she got up to replace her veil. She looked very handsome as she stood there before the glass. "They are both thrifty and are quite comfortably off. She is very good to him, and has adopted an orphan nephew of his that no one had ever heard of before."

"Oh! She was always fond of children," was all I replied. "*Ce monsieur*, her husband, is good to her?"

"Very."

While we talked I couldn't help noticing Eric. He had been presented to the parents, and was now ineffectually trying to act the host and overcome the shyness of the two boys whilst he showed off the tricks of the new canary in the old gilt cage—a descendant of a predecessor, the stuffed inhabitant of a glass case, that had piped to him in days gone by.

The elder boy was slightly Eric's senior, and the younger was his junior by a year. The elder child's auburn fluff, which I had admired when I was in Nice, had grown into wavy locks that reminded me of his mother's ; his brother wore the same in black.

When they were settled in Harley Street it was arranged that the boys were to be educated with Eric, and Marcella and I managed to be as much together as possible. It was during the first rush of patients who attested their appreciation of Sir Alan Charleston's resumption of his practice in London that a gentleman called whose card bore the name of the Honourable James Henshaw.

"I have come to consult you, Sir Alan," he said, on entering, "as I am given to understand that you are the most eminent specialist for consumption. I have a fancy that I am tending that way—at least, that there is something wrong ; and, as I am passing through London, I am anxious to have the benefit of your opinion. I have here a letter from my medical attendant in Boulogne."

Sir Alan bowed silently and glanced at the missive. Meanwhile the visitor sighed sorrowfully for himself and let his eyes wander to the Old Masters on the walls. Sir Alan, however,

did not read the letter at once, although he pretended to. He was carefully noting, unobserved, the appearance and physique of his patient—a tall, loosely jointed man, who had sauntered in with a shuffling swagger. His nose was much on one side, and the black, drooping moustache only partially concealed the twitching of the thin lips when he spoke, whilst his alert grey eyes, frank in expression when they looked full at you, had they not moved so restlessly, would have redeemed the face. Then Sir Alan read the letter, and, with a thoughtful air, discussed the symptoms, and concluded there was no reason for apprehension.

"Thank you. That's very consoling," replied the Honourable James. "Perhaps, as I am here, it would be well if you would overhaul me a bit."

"Very well; just unfasten your waistcoat. Thank you; that is quite sufficient. That will do nicely. You are wise to wear flannel. English people often need to be carefully protected. Say 'nine'!" directed Sir Alan, listening to the patient's lung.

"Nine!"

"Say 'ninety-nine.'"

The Honourable James did as he was bid.

"Quite sound. The feeling of lassitude is

often accounted for by overwork. You are one of the brainworkers, I should say, eh?"

"I have done a good deal in my day, but I have retired these many years past."

"A good deal of night work, eh? I should guess editorial."

"No. Law."

"Just as strenuous. Are you returning to Boulogne?"

"Yes. I want to get back as soon as possible."

"I ask because I think a course of waters might improve your general condition, though I cannot say they are absolutely necessary."

"I should have no objection, Sir Alan."

"Well then, what do you say to spending a few weeks in Bath?"

"Oh, I shouldn't believe in any English place!"

"But do you know the fine air there?"

"No, but I shouldn't believe in it."

"Really! You surprise me, Mr. Henshaw. Now I should like to listen a moment to the heart before you fasten your waistcoat," and Sir Alan put his head close to that organ and asked: "Did you ever in Boulogne come across a man called James Harkspur? Ah! You are subject to sudden palpitation?"

"Not at all. Never. I shan't trespass any

longer on your valuable time. In fact, I never expected you would be so kind." He got quickly into his coat. "I'll think over the matter, as it is not essential. Good morning!" he added, shaking the doctor's hand and pressing his palm.

"Good morning! Thanks. I have given you my professional opinion to the best of my ability, and now I should like to detain you a few minutes and give you my private one—Harkspur, you are an infernal rascal!" And Sir Alan, with an iron grip, suddenly seized him by both shoulders, pushed him to the table, rang the hand-bell, then placed himself with his back to the door. Harkspur stood there motionless, his mouth twitching violently, but no sound escaping. "Perhaps, as you have never been to Bath," continued Sir Alan sternly, "you have never heard of a Miss Prudence Whyte, whose blackguardly lawyer absconded with all her money. Perhaps, as you have never seen me before, you were under the calm delusion that I have never seen you, and that you would be safe here. But when I was in Bath, the elder Miss Whyte pointed you out in the Pump-room as her trusty lawyer. To experienced eyes you have not changed much, in spite of your moustache."

Harkspur, realising his danger, rushed at Sir Alan, who dodged the blow aimed at him, and which struck the door with a thud that made the man utter a groan ; nevertheless he turned the handle quickly, and darted from the room, straight into Sutherland, the portly butler, and both men fell heavily to the ground. Sir Alan was a big man, but agile for his years. He rushed to them ; the butler was little the worse, but I believe Harkspur for a few moments lay stunned upon the floor. The commotion quickly brought Marcella on the scene, for I found her there in the hall ; she told me so when I learnt all these details from her later. I witnessed the rest myself, for I had come to keep an appointment to lunch and read duets with her. I had thought it very strange, when I arrived and rang at the front door, that I should be kept waiting so long on the doorstep.

I had rung several times, when all at once I heard sounds of scuffling going on inside to the accompaniment of angry voices, and I hesitated whether or not to beat a hasty retreat. Suddenly the front door was flung open, and I stepped quickly on one side as three men came struggling towards me. That one of them must be a lunatic patient I had no doubt.

"Would you kindly ask your coachman to find a policeman, and drive him here quickly?" said Sir Alan, very red in the face from his exertions. In spite of my amazement, I noticed the portly butler was puffing and blowing, and his usually plastered-down hair was unprecedentedly rumpled, while Mr. Harkspur's quaint sitting posture on the hall floor was evidently not one of his own choice. Marcella formed an excited background. When I returned, after giving the message, she wouldn't hear of my visit being abandoned, but led me upstairs to hear all the news. "Don't wait lunch for me," called Sir Alan after us, "I may be back late."

He did come back rather late, and we stopped playing, eager for further details.

"Just like your Aunt Prue!" exclaimed Sir Alan ruefully, as he dropped into the nearest armchair. "Here I discover the scoundrel who beggared her. I accompany the captive to the police station. The police are telephoned to at Highgate to acquaint your Aunt Prue with the facts and invite her to prosecute, and she replies:

"'Poor man! I certainly won't prosecute. If he had happened to have any of my money left, I should have made him endow a free

library or something with it; but as it is all gone, let him go—it annoyed my dear sister, not me.' So that rogue leaves scot-free to-night for Boulogne! Just like your Aunt Prue!"

I only smiled.

"Your luncheon is served, Sir Alan," announced Sutherland sedately, with every hair in its place; but there was a bluish swelling near one eye which detracted pathetically from his solemn dignity.

Five more years had come and gone, and my son, though graver than of yore, would become at times more like his dear self; and whenever Eric came from Harrow for the holidays, they were like two boys together. Little Viva Georgina Lane often came to tea with us. Eric had taken quite a fancy to her, patronising her with a lofty schoolboy air, and amusing her just to hear her laugh—she had such a pretty rippling laugh. She quite took the place in his affections of "poor pussy" of old. She had her mother's merry, impulsive disposition, and on her head her father's golden top-knot of early youth that I so well remember—but a modern version and with feminine embellishments.

A letter came to me from Harry Wallace of

I HAVE OFTEN THREATENED TO WRITE ABOUT HER

all people, forwarded on from my old flat. It was written in his old racy manner, and informed us that he had just married his partner's daughter. He inquired pleasantly after us all, and begged I would write ; which I did—a letter of cordial congratulation.

Aunt Prue, God bless her! still lives and thrives. She always welcomes us as her "dearly beloved trio" with ever the same dignified and loving welcome.

"We represent four generations!" I exclaim with a quiet laugh (with a sort of surprise as if I had never discovered it before), for that will always set her off in fine form on anecdotes and recollections of the past in which we all delight —reminiscences always told with the same old sympathy and humour, and always listened to in the same old spirit of respect and enjoyment. I have often threatened to write about her, and she has only been amused and not a bit frightened. She relies upon me for choice of her literature ; but she is particular, and only those books and magazines are read to her which I recommend, so I, with regard to this same screed, I hardly think—but I am digressing. Dear Aunt Prue! She lives on serenely at the little cottage in Highgate. Robust in health, with an excellent appetite,

and alert in mind, she certainly carries her four-score years very lightly.

"Just a little stiff, Dearie, in the knees and back. However!" she is apt to remark; then to repeat confidentially, "You know we must expect all these things when we grow old. It's the old people's privilege." Her parlour is always gay with flowers, which she gathers and arranges herself. "They are just those that grow high, and don't want stooping down to," she explains.

From the wall the old portrait of herself, as a pretty infant in a frilled cap, looks cheerfully down upon her old real self in much the same cap and frills—the two faces bearing a quaint resemblance, and reflecting the same sweetness, as she sits in her large armchair by the fire busily knitting for "the most deserving case of all," or sits thinking whilst she slowly twirls her thumbs. She is a big woman with a great loving heart, and to my mind the sweetest old lady that ever lived.

The other night, when I was talking with my son about little Viva and Eric, and their affection for one another, I touched upon the happy married life of Charlie and Alma, and I ventured to remark on what had long been in my mind.

In the Future

"My dear boy," I began timidly, "I cannot last for ever, and sometimes I wonder what your life will be when I am gone."

"Don't talk of such things, Mater. You know I won't put up with it."

"Is it perhaps — possible — " I continued anxiously with what was in my mind, "just possible that in the future—oh, what will be your future life through the long years to come!"

"Dear old Mater!" He leant over me and stroked my cheek in his old nearly-forgotten way; then he added firmly, "What my life would be in the future? It would be just what it always used to be with you and me—just—my son and I."

THE END

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